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Kent Barstow, Special Agent

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Kent Barstow, Special Agent

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Kent Barstow

SPECIAL AGENT

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DUELL, SLOAN AND PEARCE New York

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Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 58-10438

First edition

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

VAN REES PRESS • NEW YORK

CO. SCHOOLS

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For

Armin Hecathorn

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Kent Barstow

SPECIAL AGENT

out of cold black eyes. Then he got to his feet and stepped around his desk.

"Glad you could make it, Barstow," he said.

Kent waited. He saw no reason for saying he was glad to be there. He returned the colonel's frank scrutiny. Jefferys had a frown between his eyes that wrinkled the flesh. He was lank and lean. The bald spot on his head was fringed with black hair. But it was his eyes that held Kent. Even the smile on the colonel's lips did not soften their steely coldness. The colonel motioned to a chair beside his desk.

"Sit down, Barstow." Jefferys walked around his desk and seated himself. He picked up a long paper knife and bent it back and forth. His lips pushed together and the lines between his eyes deepened. Kent waited. The colonel looked up from the blade he was bending.

"We know all about you, Lieutenant." The faintest trace of a smile pulled at the corners of his mouth.

"That's interesting." Kent did not know what he was supposed to say, but irritation was beginning to build up inside him. He knew very well that he had violated no single item of security regarding his recent job.

"Everything. From the time you fished Telford Soby out of San Francisco Bay up until today."

Kent gave a small start and stared at the colonel. He was eleven years old when he pulled nine-year-old Soby out of the bay after a wave had capsized his boat. He hadn't thought about the incident for a long time. He couldn't even remember what sort of medal he had been awarded for saving the boy. He had received a medal. Kent shook his head.

"This assignment we are going to ask you to undertake is so dangerous we can use only volunteers." The colonel tapped

the desk top with the paper knife. "I understand that you prefer assignments with a certain degree of risk."

Kent leaned forward in spite of himself. He was curious, even though he had made up his mind that he didn't want to work for Colonel Jefferys. The old boy was the tough sort. He would eat a man out, and he would expect the impossible. Kent had served under men like the colonel. When there was a job to be done, any man would be expendable in Jefferys' book. The colonel went on speaking thoughtfully, hardly addressing himself to Kent at all.

"Men who work for the Office of Intelligence are supposed to sit at desks and make up intelligence reports and some of us do just that. But there is more to our work than reports." The colonel's black eyes bored into Kent.

Kent shook his head. He had furnished data a hundred times to Base Intelligence, and he had been briefed by them. He knew they used the things a pilot observed to make out their reports. He understood that they pieced together a mass of bits and parts and often came up with very accurate information about what went on behind enemy lines. But this was peacetime.

"You know how we operate in wartime," the colonel said. "You worked closely with our men in Korea. But this mission has to be undertaken under, shall we say, cold-war conditions."

Kent waited, certain that the colonel would get to the point, but not caring to commit himself in any way.

"Under existing conditions we have to have certain information and undertake certain tasks. In a way what we now have to do is more imperative than it would be in case of war." The colonel stared unwinkingly at Kent.

Kent just waited, attentive, not trying to hide his interest. The colonel went on speaking slowly, as though considering

each word. "In the age of jet weapons with nuclear warheads, a surprise attack could be fatal. Our Far East defense forces might be able to give us two hours' warning, no more than that. Again they might not give us any at all."

Kent had served at Kadena on Okinawa. He knew just what the situation was out there. Outnumbered as much as five to one, in bases such as K-14 in Korea the USAF was fifteen minutes' flying time from a powerful North Korean base. The colonel had not exaggerated; the men flying in the Far East were there to buy the mainland a couple of hours' advance warning.

"We have a mission for a man of your type." The colonel opened a box and took out a long cigar. He looked at it intently before putting it between his lips, and he did not light it.

"Just what is this mission?" Kent decided it was now time to ask bluntly.

The cigar seemed to help the colonel get his thoughts in order. He chewed on it slowly. "This mission has never had a paper briefing. There never will be a record of it, except in the minds of a few men. We cannot risk investigations by committees or criticism from shortsighted individuals. If you undertake this work, you will mention it to no one." He jerked the cigar to one side. "If you fail, no one will ever know there was a mission except a few trusted officers."

Kent felt a small chill touch his spine. He stared back at the colonel. There was no doubting the sincerity of the man. The colonel removed his cigar from his mouth and frowned at the chewed end.

"Success could mean survival for millions, even a guarantee of peace for a long time." The colonel clamped down on the cigar butt. "I mean survival of millions of Americans."

Kent opened his closed fist. There were beads of perspiration inside his palm. "It sounds serious, sir," he said.

"It is."

"You are asking me to undertake this blind?" Kent leaned forward. He had been asked to test planes that no one had flown before at speeds that pushed them to the limit of their ability to hang together, but he had always known exactly what he was up against.

"You will be briefed if you accept. All that I am asking is that you agree to undertake a flying mission from which you may not return. If you die, the dying may not be easy." The colonel pulled the cigar deeper into his mouth and clamped down on it.

Kent wondered why he wasn't saying he did not want this mission. A few minutes ago he had been prepared to refuse. Now he just sat and looked at the colonel.

"If you were briefed and refused, I would have no choice but to place you where you could not talk to anyone. That might mean holding you for some time." The colonel leaned back and waited.

Kent felt bewildered, but the irritation had left him. He looked the colonel in the eye. "I'm not a hero," he said slowly. "I have taken chances, plenty of them, but I have always known the factors against me and pretty much what the odds were."

"No one is a hero," the colonel said gruffly. "We just do the best we can."

"Do I work alone?"

"To begin with, yes. But you will have a helper who will be briefed in a limited sense."

"Could I suggest a man?" Kent asked.

"Yes, but he would have to have a very high rating for security."

Kent hesitated. The realization hit him that he was going to undertake this mission. In a minute or so he would commit himself. If he asked for Spud Murphy as a helper, he'd be accepting. The colonel sat watching him, waiting for him to speak. Kent felt his body stiffen. It was like the moment before cutting in the afterburner to blast a ship through the sonic barrier.

"I could work with Spud Murphy—I mean Captain Patrick Ellington Murphy."

Colonel Jefferys relaxed. "He will need no checking. We considered using him as an alternate in case you did not accept. He has already had a small part in our plans."

"He has?" Kent looked surprised.

"He got you here on the pretext of meeting an old pal. We did not contact you at the hotel or send for you directly." The colonel smiled. "We have been very careful to cover all tracks."

"Well," Kent leaned back. "This sure is top secret."

"You accept the mission?"

"Yes," Kent answered. "I accept."

"Good. You will not contact Captain Murphy at once, perhaps not at all."

"But if he's to help me," Kent protested.

"Certain people showed an interest in Captain Murphy after we started talking to him. He might make a very good decoy." The colonel pushed back his chair.

"Will he know that much?" Kent was beginning to worry about Spud. He might be letting him in for some nasty experiences.

"He will be briefed on what to do. He will be aware that he may be followed. It will be his job to call attention to himself."

The colonel got to his feet. "We will not meet here again. We will meet at Room 214, Building T-46, in Washington tomorrow morning at eleven."

Kent smiled. "I have an appointment at Room 214 tomorrow morning to see about a MATS flight to the coast."

"That's right. A routine appointment. But I will be there and will contact you. Do not ask for me. Just do as you had planned regarding the travel space you want to Travis." The colonel held out his hand. "Until tomorrow at eleven."

After shaking hands, Kent started walking toward the door. The colonel's voice halted him. He turned around to find the colonel examining some papers on his desk.

"By the way, Barstow, what kind of camera do you carry? I understand you are something of a camera addict."

"I'll be carrying a 120 Minolta reflex," Kent answered.

"Be sure to take it along." The colonel shuffled the papers and then looked up. "You have a date to go some place tonight?"

"No," Kent answered, and smiled. "I had planned to spend my two free days sleeping."

"An excellent idea," the colonel said. "For tonight, at any rate."

"I'm not sure I'll sleep well tonight, sir," Kent replied grimly.

"Habit, Barstow. I know you test pilots. You learn to control a lot of nerves other people neglect. I am sure you will sleep well."

"Yes, sir." Kent again turned toward the door. This time there was no interruption. He opened the door and walked the length of the room with the desks. He glanced at the man he had spotted as a misfit. The officer was watching him.

Outside in the hall Kent moved away from the door fast. He could not help glancing up and down the wide hallway. No

one was in sight. He had gone a dozen steps when a door opened and a man dressed in coveralls stepped out of a room. Kent caught a glimpse of brooms and brushes hung against a wall before the man closed the door. He barely glanced at Kent as he walked past him. But Kent caught himself giving the man's face a close scrutiny. He was perhaps thirty years of age, a swarthy type with small, close-set eyes.

Kent gave a short laugh and shrugged his shoulders. He was as jumpy as a kangaroo rat on the lookout for Mojave rattlers. It was the first time in his life that he had ever given a janitor a close inspection. He walked to the ramp and followed it to the next floor.

As soon as he reached the taxi ramp, Kent waved for a cab. A cab swung around and pulled up beside the platform. There were many people in and out of uniform moving about. None of them seemed to pay any attention to him. He got into the cab.

"Raleigh Hotel," he said.

His driver was the silent type who gave all of his attention to his driving. Kent reached the hotel in record time. He got his key at the desk and went up to his room without looking at his watch. When he did look, a half hour later, he was surprised to see it was two o'clock. That made him remember lunch. He could have sandwiches sent up. That would be in keeping with his plan to be just lazy. But the room made him feel confined. He wanted to move about. He went down to the lobby and headed for the coffee shop.

The coffee shop was all but deserted. He took a table well away from anyone and ordered lunch. Kent Barstow had always had an appetite. No case of nerves had ever upset it. When his plate of braised beef arrived he started eating with relish. He had his tall glass of iced tea refilled once, and topped

off his lunch with a large piece of berry pie. He leaned back, contented.

The Negro waiter hovering nearby approached the table. "Everything all right, sir?"

"Fine," Kent said, and tucked a half-dollar beside his plate as a tip.

The waiter beamed. Kent picked up his check and strolled over to the cashier's counter. The girl gave him a smile and a pert, "Thank you, sir," as she spread his change on the counter.

Kent went up to the lobby, bought a paper, and seated himself in a deep chair. He was beginning to think that the colonel was a bit overcautious. How could there be spies with pipelines into an Intelligence office? This was the home town of the FBI. What chance would a foreign agent have in this city? He opened his paper to the sports page. Milwaukee was out in front by two games. A girl from Saratoga, California, had just smashed two Olympic swim records, just graduated from grade school, too. Everything was going along as it always had gone.

He turned the pages and read a story about a new ballistic missile. The writer of the story had used his imagination. Security had not allowed him much. He speculated that this missile would be capable of speeds in excess of sixteen thousand miles per hour, and that it would fly far above the range of any known radar screen. Kent put down the paper and frowned. Perhaps Colonel Jefferys had reason to worry.

CHAPTER 3

The Trap Is Set

FOUR people had gathered in a basement room under a warehouse on a dimly lighted Washington side street. The room had no windows and the door was secured on the inside by a heavy wooden bar that fitted into iron brackets. A narrow stairway, which was more in the nature of a ladder, rose to a trap door in the ceiling across the room from the main doorway. The unsealed beams overhead were dusty, and black trailers of spiderweb reached down like moss in a jungle. The four people sat around a table on kitchen chairs. One light bulb hung from a rafter above. It was shaded by a porcelain reflector that limited the light to the top of the table and to the circle of faces around it.

A short, dark-faced man sat at one end of the table. His features had an oriental cast, his lips were thick and pulled back from teeth that gleamed pale yellow in the light from the twenty-watt bulb overhead. He bent slightly forward as he looked from face to face.

The first person he gave his attention to sat on his right. She was small and very pretty. There was just a hint of a slant to her eyes, and her mouth had an innocent fullness that amounted almost to a pout. She smiled at the man who was regarding her.

"No one followed me," she said in a voice that was soft and low.

"You followed instructions to the letter, Asko?" The dark man spoke with a slight hiss, as though his teeth bothered him when he talked.

"I did, Comrade Galt. I did everything I was told to do." There was a hint of amusement in her dark eyes. Galt chose to ignore it. He nodded his head and turned to a man seated on his left, facing Asko across the table.

"How about you, Ridder?"

Ridder might have passed for a clerk or a filling-station attendant or any other young man working at an ordinary job. There was nothing distinctive about him, except the sullen twist of his mouth and a dullness where his eyes should have been alive. It was clear that he resented the question Galt had asked.

"No tail ever stayed with me," he said, and stared hard at Galt.

"Do not be so sure of yourself." Galt's teeth clicked shut with a snap.

"Look out for yourself, Galt. For my money you're only a messenger boy who gives us the word from the big shot." Ridder glared at Galt.

Galt shrugged his shoulders. "Remember, Ridder, you can be dispensed with." His voice had not risen but there was a change of tone that made Ridder moisten his lips nervously. "You came early and checked the place for a wire tap?"

"The place is clean." Ridder fished nervously in his pocket and pulled out a cigarette pack. He shook one out on the table.

"No smoking," Galt snapped. "You know the rule. This place is supposed to be deserted. If someone smelled a cigarette, they might wonder."

Ridder rammed the cigarette back into the pack with a thumb. He dropped the pack into a side pocket. He hated Galt because he knew Galt had him trapped and could make him do anything the short man wanted done. He did not fear Galt as much as he feared the forces back of him. What had seemed like an easy-money deal was shaping up as a murder plot with frightening angles. He made an effort to put on a front.

"You and your jitters," he growled.

Galt shifted his gaze to the fourth member of the group. He was a young man and he wore his clothes with the assurance of one who was used to being well dressed. He had been watching the others with a look that hinted he considered them something less than his equal. Here in the dusty cellar he had the same misfit appearance he had had in Colonel Jefferys' outer office when Kent Barstow noticed him. Second Lieutenant Brown was clearly a frustrated man.

"No tail ever follows me," Brown said with a half-smile. "Why waste time with this routine every time we meet?"

"We have had some success," Galt spoke slowly, passing over Brown with a glance that slid away and rested on Asko. "That is because we have paid attention to small things, routine things. I must know if any of you are ever followed. That will mean you, and perhaps all of us, are under suspicion. We act according to plan if that happens." His eyes left Asko and moved around the table.

No one answered him, but Asko smiled demurely and lifted a small hand to her hair.

"As I said, we have had some success." Galt's eyes came to Brown and held there. "Your superior and your fellow officers have shown no signs of undue interest in you, Lieutenant Brown?"

A defiant frown formed on Brown's face. He resented being reminded that he was the most insignificant member of Colonel Jefferys' unit. At moments like this he always had an after-thought that restored his esteem for himself. It was because of his insignificance that he had been able to get information that would be his revenge. Once he was even, he would resign. His weak chin thrust itself forward.

"I could as well be dead and buried. I'm an errand boy." He smiled suddenly. Being an errand boy had allowed him access to a good many papers.

Galt nodded with satisfaction. "Good. Good. I have gone over your report carefully. It has some value." His eyes moved to Ridder and then across to Asko.

"What's the pitch?" Ridder demanded. He had been doing small errands, spending nights on a wire-tap stake-out, or watching from a roof for four months. He was getting weary of such assignments.

Galt frowned. He disliked the way Ridder abused the English language. Ridder had been born in America and educated here. He, Galt, had learned English from a missionary. He prided himself upon his selection of words.

"The leader sends word that the time for action has arrived." Galt smiled at Asko.

Brown leaned forward a little. "Who is this great man?"

"That I do not know," Galt said, and his eyes rested thoughtfully on Brown's face. Brown looked down at his hands. "It is best that you do not know. He is well placed and able to secure accurate information. We simply follow his orders."

"O.K., we been over that before," Ridder said impatiently. "I don't care who he is so long as you come through with the dough. Got it with you?"

"I have the agreed amounts," Galt answered. He pulled a

brown envelope from his pocket and opened it. There were three sets of bills, each fastened with a paper clip. The bill on the top pile was a hundred-dollar denomination. Galt passed it to Asko. She placed a hand on it but did not pick it up.

"Thank you," she said with her quick smile.

Galt passed the next stack down the table to Brown who shoved it into an inside pocket without looking at it. The last sheaf went to Ridder. He fanned through the bills after tossing the paper clip on the floor. Galt bent and picked up the bit of metal. He dropped it into a pocket. Ridder wadded the bills into a tight roll and shoved them into his pants pocket.

"When's Mister Big going to raise the ante?" he asked.

"There will be a bonus for all if this goes well." Galt held them with a steady gaze for a few moments. "If we fail, there will be a different kind of bonus."

For a long minute there was silence. Brown spoke first. "What do we do now?"

"For the present you will do nothing. You have done your part for the time." He turned to Asko. "You know your instructions?"

"Yes. I know what I am to do." Asko placed her other hand on the bills and flattened the fingers of both hands.

"And you?" Galt turned to Ridder.

"I'm set," Ridder said. "It will be a cinch."

Galt faced Asko. His hand delved into a baggy pocket. He laid a small metal disc no larger than a half-dollar beside the bills under her fingers. The disc appeared to be made of aluminum and was twice the thickness of a coin. Asko touched it with one finger and smiled.

"It is so small," she said softly.

Ridder leaned forward and stared at the small disc. His mouth twisted into a grin. "Real neat," he muttered.

Galt paid no attention to Ridder. He leaned toward Asko. "You will board a C.A.L. plane, Flight 411, tomorrow night. You will be met at San Francisco International Airport, and driven to Travis Air Force Base. You will be a dependent traveling to Tokyo to meet your husband." He paused to allow the girl to absorb what he had said.

"I am bound for Tokyo." One finger turned the disc around. "I am a dependent going to the Far East to be with my husband."

"You are the wife of Airman William Hanson. There is an Airman William Hanson in Tokyo, and you look much like his wife." Galt smiled briefly. "She has disappeared, leaving her papers with me. You will use the American name he has given his wife. That name is Rose. You will be Rose Hanson."

"I am Rose Hanson, wife of William Hanson." The girl nodded her head.

"There will be an Air Force lieutenant named Kent Barstow aboard. He will be pointed out to you tomorrow at his hotel so that you will know him. Manage to arouse his sympathy." Galt really did smile.

"I will get his sympathy," Asko said sweetly.

"You should manage to sit beside him, if possible. But you will have plenty of time. There will be the flight to Travis. This time you can use to get him interested."

Asko laughed softly. "I have flown with MATS before. I entered this country as a dependent."

"You will act after you leave Travis for Hickam in Honolulu. If you are seated beside him, it will be easy for you to slip this disc into one of his pockets. If he is one who removes his jacket while in flight, slip the disc into a shirt or trouser pocket.

It must be in his pocket when he goes back to the washroom. The likely time would be shortly after flight lunches are served and eaten."

"Leave the details to me," Asko said. She looked at Ridder and she did smile. "Be sure he does his part."

Ridder leaned forward, his face flushed with anger. "What gives here? You planning to blast that plane with us aboard her?"

Galt stared at him coldly. "The plan considers your safety. We understand that you are an expert with blasts, an artist, I believe you once said. Only this Lieutenant Barstow will be blown up. The plane will go on and finish the flight—less one washroom and this Barstow."

"I can plant the blast before the ship takes off at Travis," Ridder said. "Why have me aboard?"

"We will take no chances of having the plane checked. You fly to Travis and on to Hickam. You plant the charge when you are near the halfway mark in the flight." Galt glared at Ridder. "I am aware that you are yellow. You are committing a crime for a price and not for a cause. But we have you in a position where your life isn't worth the smallest coin in your pocket. You will do as you are told."

Ridder's face changed from angry red to gray. He tried to meet Galt's cold eyes and failed. "So I'm yellow," he muttered.

"If plan one fails we will use plan two and you are a part of that plan. You were selected for this job because you have spent a lot of time in Hawaii. You know a lot of people of a certain class," Galt said. "You will be met by a man you know well. He will tell you what to do. If the first plan works, you will be free to spend a holiday in Hawaii among your friends and return at your leisure."

"Yeah," Ridder muttered. "I'll probably be hot as a pistol."

"Not if you work smoothly. There is no reason to connect you with anything. Your papers are in order," Galt snapped.

Brown had been shifting nervously on his chair for some time. He cleared his throat loudly. When he spoke, his voice was strained.

"You people are crazy. I understood when I came in that I was just to pass along some information you could take to your superiors. I want no part in a murder. That C-97 will have more than seventy people aboard. That could mean mass murder." Brown's voice rose to a querulous squeak.

Galt turned on Brown and spoke in a harsh voice. "You are in an even more delicate position than Mr. Ridder. One small tip from us would place you in a serious position. We would risk nothing in giving that tip."

Brown flushed and licked his lips. The air of superiority had left him; he was a desperately frightened man.

Galt regarded the three people seated at the table for a full moment before he spoke. "We are breaking up this meeting," he said, then turned to Asko. "You will stay with me and I will tell you all you must know about your husband, William Hanson."

Brown and Ridder got to their feet. Brown almost ran to the barred door. Galt let them out and dropped the bar into place. He crossed the cellar quickly and climbed the ladder stairway. Pushing the trap door upward, he vanished.

The girl sat and stared at the small stack of bills with the disc on top of them, a faint, dreamy smile curving her lips. She did not move when Galt returned to the table and sat down, but her eyes shifted to his face questioningly.

"Brown cannot be trusted. I had him here tonight to test him. He will crack and run babbling to his superior officer if he is given time to brood."

"He would be worthless to the cause," Asko said.

Galt nodded. "So I have just called T4."

Asko smiled. She reached down to the floor beside her chair and lifted a small white handbag. Opening it, she tucked the disc into a little pocket beside a compact and a tiny notebook.

"Fools," Galt muttered. "We work mostly with fools. But we dare not bring in too many of our own." He looked at the girl keenly and for the first time that night he really smiled. "When you left the leader tonight, did he mention my work?"

Asko laughed a laugh that tinkled. She looked down into her open handbag and shook her head. "So small a thing to blow up a man."

Galt spoke quickly to cover up his irritation because the girl had pointedly refused to say she was or was not a close friend of the area leader. "The disc does not blow the man up. It triggers the charge Ridder will conceal in the washroom. When the disc comes close to the bomb, the explosion follows."

"Oh," she said. "I knew it would all be worked out in a very smart way." She reached out and patted Galt's hand. "The leader appreciates your work very much."

Galt drew back his shoulders. "Thank you," he said. "Now shall we start going over a few things?"

"I need only to know a thing or two," Asko said. "I will ask a few questions." She smiled demurely at Galt. He was plainly taken aback. Her smile changed to the tingling laugh.

"You've seen all the stuff we have on Hanson?"

Asko nodded. "But there are a few questions."

CHAPTER 4

Briefed

LIVING on an Air Force base had trained Kent to wake up early in the morning. He opened his eyes and lay for a few minutes getting himself placed. He was in a room at the Raleigh Hotel. He didn't have to scramble out of bed and rush to the officers' field mess. He could take his time—the coffee shop downstairs never closed. He remembered his plan to sleep, but he could not go back to sleep.

He lay looking at the ceiling and thinking about what had happened to him in the past three days. He had reported in and spent a day with a small group of high-ranking officers, mostly Air Force engineers. He had been told he was free to do as he pleased. He did not have to report in at Nellis until the tenth. That gave him two days in Washington. They certainly hadn't given him any time to relax. Here he was off on another mission.

Kent decided that his new mission was in some way connected with the test projects he had worked on in the Mojave Desert. He could not figure out how Intelligence would have anything to do with that project, but that seemed to be the answer to his being picked for the job. They also considered Spud, so the mission had to do with flying hot jets. Spud had done a lot of jet flying before he had shifted to Information. Kent pushed back the sheet and swung his feet to the carpet.

He liked action at a time like this. He'd shower, shave, have breakfast, then go for a walk.

As he showered and shaved his mind kept working at the problem ahead. He wished Spud was going along with him. It was always easier when you had a pal you could depend on. The way it looked, Spud would be off by himself acting as a red herring. Anyway, Spud would get a kick out of fooling a lot of foreign agents. Kent frowned at his reflection in the shaving mirror. The colonel had said the going could get rough. If there was trouble around, Spud was usually in it. For a few minutes he wished he hadn't asked for Captain Murphy. Then he laughed. He was certainly not living up to his training, worrying about something he knew nothing about.

It was early for breakfast at the Raleigh, but the coffee shop downstairs was open, according to the card hanging in the elevator. Kent stepped out of the elevator and crossed the lobby to drop his key on the desk before turning to the street entrance. There were three people in the lobby. One, a small girl, was almost wholly hidden behind a newspaper. Judging from her ankles and open-toed slippers, she was not more than eleven or twelve years old. He glanced at the two men seated near the door. Neither of them looked up as he passed. They looked like tourists, especially the one wearing the sports shirt.

Out on the street Kent took a deep breath. It amused him that he had suddenly started noticing people around him. He was really looking at them. He walked to the corner and down the steps leading to the coffee shop.

Kent took his time eating breakfast. He had at least four hours to kill before reporting to T-46. He finished his second cup of coffee and paid his check. Upstairs in the hotel he found the lobby deserted except for a cashier in a wire cage and the desk clerk. He bought a paper and sat down to glance over the

headlines. There was nothing of interest. The news had been so slim that a hit-and-run killing had been run on the front page. An Air Force lieutenant had been hit while crossing a street. The police were looking for the driver of the car. The sports section had little of interest. He tossed the paper aside and got to his feet. What he needed was a long, fast walk.

His walk led him past many office buildings he had heard or read about. The sidewalk passed through a corner of the Bureau of Internal Revenue. Kent grinned as he emerged from the building. He had been in the income-tax building and it had cost him nothing. He hiked on past a park laid out on rolling ground. The park looked inviting, a squirrel frisked around a man seated on a bench. The man had a bag of peanuts, and he was sharing them with the squirrel.

Kent walked across the grass and seated himself on a bench. Another squirrel appeared and hopped close, sniffing and chattering. Kent had no peanuts so the squirrel moved on. Kent looked back along the sidewalk. If anyone had followed him, it would be one of Colonel Jefferys' men. He'd like to try spotting the man if he was being tailed. The sidewalk was deserted, and no one was loitering near any of the buildings below. He glanced at his watch. By the time he got back to the hotel he could get a cab and drive to T-46. He got to his feet and sauntered back along the street.

There were several cabs parked at the curb near the hotel entrance. Kent stopped at the first taxi and gave the driver the address of T-46. The driver nodded and started his engine. It was ten minutes to eleven when the cab pulled up at the entrance to T-46. The building was part of a temporary housing unit built during World War II. It was to have been torn down after the war, but its office space was badly needed

so it remained, an unsightly structure in a beautiful city, its asbestos-shingled walls cracked, its paint peeling.

Kent paid the driver and walked up the steps. He climbed a worn stairway to the second floor where he checked the floor layout on a board near the head of the stairs. Room 214 was down a hallway to his left. He moved past open doors and closed doors. Officers and airmen passed him as he moved along. The door to Room 214 was open. He entered, and hesitated while he looked the place over. A long counter stretched the length of the room. Officers and men in shirt sleeves worked back of the counter. Kent approached the nearest man, an airman second class. The airman glanced up inquiringly.

"I'm Lieutenant Barstow. I believe I have a MATS clearance waiting for me."

The airman laid down a pencil. "I'll check," he said. He turned and walked to a bank of filing cases. Within a few minutes he was back with a sheet of paper. He initialed it and shoved it across to Kent. "Here it is, sir. If you will follow me, sir." He reached over and lifted a section of the counter.

Kent followed the airman through a door leading into an adjoining room. The room was unfurnished save for a table and four chairs.

"Wait here, sir." The airman turned and left by another door.

Kent moved over to a large chart hanging on the wall. It showed the MATS routes to all parts of the world. Kent was heading West so his eyes followed the Pacific flight route to Hawaii, Midway, and then Tokyo. Was his destination Tokyo? It could be Alaska. From Travis he could go anywhere.

Colonel Jefferys entered through a side door. He was half-way across the room before Kent realized that he had entered.

"Good morning, Barstow." Colonel Jefferys looked as hard and as intense as he had the day before.

Kent smiled. "You fellows are real gumshoes. I didn't hear you come in."

The colonel smiled. "Being careful becomes a habit." He removed his jacket and hung it on a rack, placing his cap above it. "Make yourself comfortable, Barstow. No air-conditioning in this room." The colonel seated himself at the small table and laid a leather case on the green blotter pad.

Kent removed his jacket and cap and hung them beside the colonel's. He sat down across the table from Jefferys.

The colonel took out several sheets of tissue from the leather case. He smoothed them out and sat reading. Kent waited impatiently. He was sure the colonel did not have to read what was typed on those sheets. At last the colonel looked up.

"We know all about your work on the Mojave Desert," he said, his eyes alert for any change in Kent's expression.

Kent stared back at him. He had sworn not to discuss any phase of that project with any man not cleared and vouched for. No one had vouched for the colonel.

"Who gave you the information?" he asked curtly.

"General Miller." There was a hint of amusement at the corners of the colonel's lips. "Project Monster seems to be the answer to a number of things."

Kent frowned. "You know I am not at liberty to discuss that project, even with you," he said stiffly.

The colonel leaned back and studied Kent. "Under what conditions would you discuss Project Monster with me?"

"In the presence of, and under instructions to do so from, General Miller." Kent spoke crisply. Rank meant nothing in a case like this. He outranked any other man when it came to a point of security on a top-secret project.

Colonel Jefferys smiled. He got to his feet. "If you will come with me, Lieutenant." He almost bowed.

Kent followed the colonel through the door Jefferys had entered by and found himself in another small room. General Miller was seated at a desk. The general smiled at him. Miller was an exact opposite of Jefferys. He was a mild-mannered man who usually kept the iron fist well concealed.

"Sit down, Kent," he said. "Some things have come up since I saw you day before yesterday."

Kent walked to a chair beside the desk and sat down. Colonel Jefferys seated himself on the general's left. The general's smile widened. He was very fond of Kent. He had worked with him closely on Project Monster.

"Jefferys has some pet ideas," he began. "He wanted to know how good a security risk you really were. Perhaps he owes you an apology."

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"Not at all," Kent said quickly. He had caught an angry glint in Colonel Jefferys' eyes. Jefferys wasn't apologizing for being suspicious of anyone. The general turned to Jefferys.

"Now you can get down to business, Colonel. Kent will tell you what you need to know." He pulled a pipe from a pocket and started rummaging in another for his tobacco pouch.

Jefferys had the tissue sheets and his leather case with him. He spread the sheets before him. Then he opened the leather case and took out a package of roll film. It was a familiar carton to Kent, 120 size, black-and-white type. Colonel Jefferys pushed the carton aside.

"There is not a great deal to brief you on here," he said. "It is best that you do not know all of the details now. If you do not know the details, you cannot divulge them. Upon reaching Tokyo you will find your instructions here." He tapped the package of film.

Kent stared at the yellow package. He was thinking that if

he was to carry the information on him he might as well know what it was. If he was waylaid, the film would be on his person.

"This is the sort of thing Intelligence thinks up," the general said, and smiled broadly.

Jefferys did not smile. "We are careful," he said. "Load your camera with this film. Take any pictures you wish to take. I'd suggest you shoot a few. If anyone steals your camera and develops this film, the pictures will come out just as you took them. Not until the film is immersed in a chemical solution I will give you will your instructions appear." Colonel Jefferys tapped the package with a finger.

"If someone steals the camera and gets the chemical, they will have the instructions," Kent said. He felt an urge to locate a flaw in Jefferys' plan.

The colonel took a plastic bottle from the leather case and placed it beside the film. It bore a familiar trade name and was labeled "After-Shave Lotion."

"You use a safety razor and after-shave lotion," the colonel said.

Kent smiled. "I use this brand."

"I told you we know everything about you." He opened the plastic bottle and passed it to Kent.

"It can be used for lotion in a pinch," the general said with a chuckle.

Kent sniffed at the bottle. The fragrance was very familiar. He used such a scented lotion every morning after shaving. He grinned at the general. The precautions taken were certainly elaborate.

"We are sure that no one will connect you with this mission. You have a legitimate reason for traveling. You are starting a tour of duty in the Far East. That is natural after finishing one on the Mojave Desert." Jefferys' eyes held a glint of satisfaction.

"It's still not quite clear to me why I can't make contact with your men in Tokyo and get my instructions," Kent said.

"In a case like this the number of people with information needs to be limited. Many of our men are known operatives. We do not know how many are listed. The man we picked to give the information to might be known."

Kent frowned but he nodded agreement. He still could not believe there was much danger of a leak. Colonel Jefferys started explaining the nature of the mission and Kent leaned forward eagerly.

"The purpose of your mission can be stated briefly. Project Monster has developed a mechanical means of making aircraft invisible to radar. There is no bounce from a craft fitted with this device." The colonel paused to fish a cigar out of his pocket and put it in his mouth.

Kent leaned forward and glanced at General Miller. The general nodded. "The mechanism hasn't been completely proven. It has some bugs in it," Kent protested.

"You have made it work," the colonel said dryly. "Not once, but every time you tested it."

Kent squirmed. He had made the monster work many times. But with others there had been failures. He had passed on a detailed report on why he thought they had failed. He was certain that with further improvement any man who could fly a jet could use the machine. It would eventually be able to operate without any manual help from a pilot. But the changes could not have been made. They would take several months. The colonel seemed to feel there was no call for further argument. He shoved the film and the plastic bottle toward Kent.

"The film may be immersed in this solution in daylight," he explained. "In that case you lose your pictures, but the message will appear," Jefferys said seriously.

Kent laughed. It seemed really funny to him. Who would care about a few frames of pictures?

"Just what is my mission?" he asked.

"We have learned of large-scale activity in North Korea, and in other places where the Communists have long-range strato-jet bombers based. It appears that an operation is contemplated, we do not know how extensive, but any aggression against South Korea or Japan would involve us in what might be all-out war." The colonel folded the tissues. He picked a match book from beside an ash tray and struck a match. The flame licked upward and set the tissues afire. The colonel dropped the flaming mass into the ash tray. He chewed a moment on his cigar.

"At times it is to our advantage to let a potential enemy know wherein our strength lies. By demonstrating that we can fly through his radar screen undetected we will have given him a lot to think about. He would know that we could strike anywhere with the element of complete surprise in our favor."

"In a way we will be bluffing," General Miller said. "Within a year this will be no bluff. We are counting upon the enemy not knowing how far we have advanced."

Kent sat thinking. He had known all along that the monster would be a powerful peace weapon, but he had never dreamed that he would be called upon to demonstrate it to a foreign power.

"This is urgent?" The moment he asked the question, he knew it was a foolish one. The Air Force would not use the monster as it now was unless the need was desperate.

"Time is of the essence," General Miller said. "We cannot afford to wait until we are in production. The machine can be mass produced in a hurry, but not until it is perfected."

"Why not stage a demonstration against our own radar and invite them to sit in?" Kent asked.

"They would believe we had rigged it," the colonel said sharply. "If we penetrate their own screen, they will have to believe."

Kent nodded. It could be done. He had always mastered the monster before. He would be flying a craft he believed was the fastest and most maneuverable in the world, the needle-nosed F-102A.

"I'll fly the F-102A?" he asked.

"The same ship you used in testing the monster," General Miller assured him.

Kent looked from the general to the colonel. "I'm ready to try," he said.

The three officers got to their feet. Kent dropped the film and the plastic bottle into his pocket. General Miller held out his hand.

"Good luck, Kent."

"Thank you, sir."

"I have an appointment and will have to run along." The general crossed to a side door and left the room.

Jefferys stood watching Kent. Finally he said, "Much depends upon you, Barstow. If you need us, that is, if it is clear to you that someone knows what you are doing, you can contact any Intelligence office. The code name is 'Black Rose.'"

Kent and the colonel returned to the room where they had met. They put on their jackets and caps.

"I'll leave you to go out by the front door." Colonel Jefferys faced Kent. "Carry on, Barstow."

"Yes, sir," Kent answered. He felt as he had when he was a cadet and the discipline was tough, when a commander was ready to wash any man out who showed the slightest weakness.

Jefferys strode to the door and vanished. Kent walked through the long room with the counter, and out into the hall.

There were no cabs in sight on the street. He looked back at the entrance to T-46 but decided not to return and call a cab. He had the afternoon before him and might as well walk.

As he strode along his thoughts were busy with the coming mission. He would not know where the base of take-off would be until later, possibly when he developed the film in Tokyo. He glanced over his shoulder a number of times. No one was following him, though a number of persons were going his way. But if he was being trailed, the person would not appear to be following him. He decided to turn left up a side street. There were two men and a woman behind him.

He turned left and walked fast. At the next intersection he paused and glanced back. One of the men had also turned left and was walking slowly toward him. Kent decided to wait. The man was dressed in civilian clothes and carried a thin brief case. He wore no hat and his sandy hair was ruffled by the breeze. He reached the intersection where Kent stood, and paused. He grinned at Kent.

"You lost, too?" he asked.

"Sort of," Kent answered. "I guess I should have gone straight ahead instead of turning left."

"You wouldn't know where T-46 is, would you?" the man asked.

"I can show you," Kent said.

He walked back to the main street and pointed out the building the stranger was looking for.

"Came right past it." The man grinned. "Thanks." He moved off at a fast pace. Kent walked on down the street. He decided he would quit looking back. But he hurried and he did look back several times.

CHAPTER 5

Flight West

KENT BARSTOW arrived at the Washington airport a few minutes before seven-thirty. He had his camera bag slung over his shoulder and was carrying his flight bag. The big lobby was a busy place. Kent moved across the room to the C.A.L. Lines desk. There was a line of people waiting to have their tickets validated and their baggage weighed. Kent looked them over, starting with the fat man who was protesting because his bags were overweight and he would have to pay excess-baggage charges.

"I weighed 'em myself," the man growled. His naturally red face glowed with anger.

"Sorry, sir," the girl behind the desk said. "I can only go by our scales. If you will pay the one dollar and sixty-five cents . . ."

Kent's eyes moved to the next man in line. He was thin-faced and dark. He fingered his ticket envelope nervously and frowned at the fat man's back. Kent decided to keep an eye on the man.

Next was a young couple. They stood close together, the boy holding the girl's hand. They were so clearly interested only in each other that Kent's eyes passed over them quickly.

Directly ahead of him was a man wearing a tan topcoat. The man had a bulging brief case tucked under his arm. He

was smoking a pipe and had the bit clenched in his teeth as though angry. When Kent's eyes rested on him, the man half-turned and glanced back. His eyes were gray and cold. There was no reaction at all in the gray eyes as they passed over Kent. He could well be a type of civilian who disliked a uniform.

The fat man had finally paid his excess-baggage charge and the line moved forward. Kent was aware of a late arrival in the line. He looked back and saw a very small girl. She had a heavy imitation-leather suitcase which she dropped to the floor, and she held a white handbag. She was Oriental and reminded Kent of a doll. She appeared too young and shy to be traveling alone. Kent looked around, expecting to see someone coming to join her. She looked up at Kent and smiled briefly.

When the line moved again, Kent stepped aside and reached to pick up the girl's heavy bag.

"Go ahead," he said. "I'll put your bag on the scale."

"Thank you." She moved forward quickly. The bag was heavy. Kent wondered how far she had had to lug it. She certainly had acted relieved when he offered to take it.

Several other passengers had arrived and waited in line, but Kent did not notice them. He put the girl's suitcase on the scale and watched while she fumbled in her bag for her ticket. She bent over and opened the bag only wide enough to get her hand inside. Kent decided that she was afraid someone would see into the bag. She probably had all the money she possessed in that bag.

The girl behind the desk validated her ticket and stapled a baggage check to it. She took the envelope and stepped aside. She stood looking around as though not knowing what to do next.

Kent passed over his ticket after putting his flight bag on the scales. It was checked and handed back to him. He had kept

his camera bag as a carry-on parcel. He did not intend to let it get out of his hands. When he turned away from the counter, he saw the small girl moving toward the lounge.

He stopped at the magazine rack and then moved to a rack of paper-back books. He selected several mystery novels. He picked them by their authors, knowing the sort of stories they wrote. He walked into the lounge and sat down. The place was crowded and Kent realized that there would be no point in checking the hundreds of people moving about or sitting waiting for the announcement of their flights. The little oriental girl sat across from him. She had her white handbag on her lap and both small hands clutched it tightly.

Kent opened one of the books and started reading. When the girl saw that he was absorbed in the book, she watched him warily. She was going over in her mind the things she had to do. Ridder strolled by carrying a leather case. He paused as though looking for a place to sit down. The girl inclined her head toward Kent. Ridder set his case on a chair and got out a pack of cigarettes. He lit one and studied Kent through the smoke for a space of half a minute, then he picked up the leather case and strolled to a chair some distance from the girl.

"C.A.L. Flight 411 loading at ramp seven," the P.A.'s tinny voice announced. "All aboard."

Kent turned down the corner of the page he was reading. He slung his camera bag over his arm and got to his feet. The girl had remained seated. Kent moved past her toward the exit marked seven. As he passed her, he smiled and said, "This is your flight, miss."

She got quickly to her feet. "Thank you," she said. Clutching her handbag, she followed Kent toward the exit. Kent paused and let her move ahead of him. He noticed that she

had her ticket envelope in one hand, pressed against her handbag. She shifted the bag and the envelope fell to the floor. The girl hurried on without noticing that she had lost anything.

Kent stooped and picked up the envelope. He glanced at it briefly before hurrying after her. The name on the outside of the envelope was Mrs. William Hanson. So she was married, probably going to San Francisco to meet her husband. He caught up with her, and when he was beside her he held the envelope so that she could see it.

"You will need this," he said.

She stared at the envelope, then reached out and took it. She seemed very close to panic. Kent decided she needed someone to keep an eye on her.

"Thank you," she said.

Kent laughed, and she looked up at him questioningly.

"I was just wondering if that was all you can say?" Kent explained.

"Oh," she said, making her red mouth round. "No, but . . ." She let the word hang in the air.

They moved through the swinging doors, and Kent made no attempt to talk. She had probably been warned not to talk to strangers. He chuckled to himself as they walked down the long ramp to the exit.

The girl paused before a mirror on a vending machine. She slipped a hand into her bag and got out a compact. Kent found himself in line ahead of her when he passed through the gate. He did not wait for her. He'd probably not see her again. The plane was a big DC-7 so they were almost certain to be separated.

Kent got aboard and settled himself next to a window. He didn't have much of a choice because he had not hurried and the plane was almost filled before he got aboard. He shoved

his camera bag back under the seat and tucked the extra books into the seat pocket ahead of him. He was opening the book he had been reading when he glanced up. The little oriental girl stood in the aisle looking uncertainly at the vacant seat beside him.

"May I sit here?" she asked hesitantly.

"Be glad to have you as a seat partner, Mrs. Hanson," Kent answered.

For a moment her eyes opened wide, then she sank into the seat and clasped her bag in her lap. She gave Kent a bashful side-glance.

"Thank you." She pushed her small, trim back against the upright seat.

"After take-off we can lower our seats and be comfortable," Kent explained.

She did not answer. Kent stirred. The plane was unusually warm. He got to his feet and removed his jacket and cap, placing them in the overhead rack. Settling back, he watched the last of the passengers board the plane. It was clear that this non-stop flight was going out fully loaded. The warning lights came on: "No SMOKING. TIGHTEN SEAT BELTS."

Kent listened to the first outboard engine as it slowly turned its propeller. The big radial ground away until the engine started to roar. One by one the other three radials came to life and the DC-7 rolled out toward the flight line.

It had been a long time since Kent had flown a piston-engine aircraft. He decided that after they were under way he'd go forward and meet the captain of the ship. He glanced at the girl beside him. She had not fastened her seat belt; she was sitting holding tightly to her handbag.

"Can I help you with your seat belt?" Kent had to speak

loudly because the pilot was revving up the engines. He pointed to his own belt.

She started feeling along the arm of her seat uncertainly. Kent pulled up the strap on his side, then reached over and got the other one. He adjusted the strap to her slim hips and tightened it. She gave him her shy smile.

"Thank you." He could not hear the words, but he read the message from her lips.

The four engines revved up, and the ship shuddered as it strained to be off. Kent listened, and remembered the many times he had given similar power plants full throttle before take-off. Smoothly the big DC-7 started rolling. For a space there was the feel of the black top as they gained speed, then there was a gentle lift and they were airborne.

They gained altitude and the warning lights flicked off. Kent released the girl's seat belt and adjusted her seat so that she could rest comfortably. Again she gave him the shy smile and murmured an unheard "Thank you."

The big ship droned westward, knifing along at well over three hundred miles per hour. Two uniformed stewardesses began fitting racks into the seat arms for serving dinner. They brought a delicious dinner, the containers nestling in holes cut in a cardboard tray. The girl refused coffee, but ate eagerly and finished everything set before her. Kent wasn't very hungry but he ate his steak and salad and drank two cups of coffee.

Kent noticed that the girl kept her handbag on her lap while she ate. He was faintly amused. No one aboard such a plane would try to steal a not too new handbag. He would have been startled if he had known what was in the handbag. There was a generous supply of money, and there was a small automatic pistol and a thin-bladed stiletto with an ivory handle. There was also a bottle of potent, tasteless sleeping tablets. A small

metal disc was tucked into the back of the girl's compact. There were few of the odds and ends usually found in a pretty girl's handbag.

The hours passed and the girl slept with her hands clasped over the handbag. Kent finished the book he had started reading and looked at his watch. He had not visited forward and now they were losing altitude and would soon be down over San Francisco Bay. The girl opened her eyes and leaned forward, then glanced at Kent.

"We're coming in to San Francisco International," he said, and waited, wondering if she would tell him something about herself. She merely smiled at him. Kent let his gaze move to the outside. He watched the tabs creep outward and down. The warning lights came on, and he fastened the girl's seat belt. The smooth water of the bay flashed below the silver wings. He could see the Bay Bridge and, to the right, the span of the Golden Gate Bridge rising gracefully above the gateway to the Pacific.

The plane landed and Kent did not hurry. There would be a car and a driver waiting for him. He would have liked to spend an evening in San Francisco, but he would not get the chance. He would report at once to Travis Air Force Base where MATS transportation to Tokyo would be waiting for him. The girl got up and was caught in the stream and press of eager passengers moving forward. She looked back and gave Kent a smile that was much more than the shy ones she had managed before. Then she was hidden from sight.

Kent got off the plane and entered the airport. He hurried up the ramp and went straight on down to the baggage room. As he waited for the little trucks to bring in the bags, he looked around for the girl but did not see her. He would have liked to have caught a glimpse of her husband. The baggage came and

he claimed his flight bag. He spotted the girl's worn suitcase and hesitated. He stood for several minutes watching the bags claimed. At last there was only one left, the shabby suitcase. No one had claimed it. He looked around uneasily, then shrugged his shoulders. She just could not be so dumb as not to know where to claim her baggage. He turned and climbed the stairs to the main lobby. Before he had walked past the counters lining the walls which were the offices of the many airlines operating out of San Francisco International he spotted an airman standing gazing at a new Dodge car that rested on a display pedestal. He had an idea the youngster was his driver.

He stood looking on into the main foyer with its high glass windows, thinking that San Francisco had one of the finest airports in the nation. In such a setting it seemed fantastic to think that in the milling crowd there could be men who were trailing him. He grinned. With all of the precautions taken by the colonel he wasn't in any danger. He walked over to the airman.

"You from Travis?" he asked.

The airman turned smartly and snapped a salute. "Yes, sir. Are you Captain Barstow?"

Kent smiled as he returned the snappy salute. "I'm Barstow. Let's get going."

CHAPTER 6

Death Aboard

KENT had drawn number sixteen for the flight from Travis to Hickam. He stood watching at the gate while the V.I.P.'s and dependents were checked in. He, himself, had received an ordinary serviceman's number, as planned. He was startled to see little Mrs. Hanson in the crowd waiting at the gate. Then he was glad she was going to be aboard. He didn't know why, she probably would not sit near him. But then he might be able to help her aboard the C-97.

When Kent entered the plane he saw that the girl had not picked a seat. Perhaps she wanted to sit with him again. He selected an inside seat and got his camera bag fixed. He was aware that she was moving forward. When she paused beside his seat, he looked up and smiled. Perhaps he could ask her why she had waited so long to claim her bag at the San Francisco Airport.

"Hello," he said.

She gave him her shy smile. "May I sit here?" she asked.

"Certainly." It was probably foolish for him to feel good because she wanted to sit next to him. He was sure she wouldn't say a word to him on the flight to Honolulu. It would just be two thousand miles of silence. She sat down and clasped her handbag tightly in her lap. Then she looked at him.

"Thank you," she said, and lowered her eyes.

"Are those still the only two words you can say?" Kent felt he had a right to talk a little with her.

"No." She settled herself and started feeling for the seat belt.

"You have a man waiting in Tokyo?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You live in Tokyo?"

"No."

Kent laughed. "Where do you live?"

"At the base, Johnson."

Kent regarded her with an amused smile. It was her business if she didn't want to talk with him. But she was a very pretty girl. Her eyebrows were perfectly arched as though drawn on her face—but in fact they had only been helped out with a pencil at the tips. He adjusted her seat belt and fastened it.

"We'll be old friends by the time we get to Tokyo," he said.

"You go to Tokyo?"

Kent felt annoyed at himself. This was the first time he had told anyone where he was going. Then he nodded and grinned. He could probably tell this girl about what he was going to do when he got to Tokyo. She wouldn't understand what he was talking about.

She settled back stiffly and did not say any more. Kent was glad there would be daylight for the flight. He could read a couple of books.

They were seated well forward, close to the alcove used by the attendants. A blond Wac started explaining survival procedures in case of ditching. She demonstrated the self-inflating life jacket, then gave them flight information. Kent settled down to read.

The C-97 warmed up and rolled out to the runway. Kent listened to the engines. They sounded smooth and in top form. The plane was cool and Kent had not removed his jacket. He

fastened his own seat belt and opened his book. He knew he would not really read until after the take-off. There is something about taking off that keeps any pilot alert, even though he is just a passenger.

Ten minutes later they were off and heading for the California coast. The big ship rose above a flat gray sea of fog and thundered on out over the Pacific. Kent looked down at the first page of his book. He started reading. There was a body on page three. The detective hero found it in his own bedroom. Kent frowned. He paused to wonder how many times he had started a book and had the detective find a corpse in his bedroom. He couldn't remember, of course, mystery stories being so much alike. But this one would have some new angles. Its author was a master at plotting.

The girl beside him stirred and glanced at the book. Kent turned to her. "I have an extra book," he said. "Would you care to read?"

"Yes," she said.

Kent leaned forward. He had tucked the books and magazines into the container fastened to the back of the seat ahead of him. The girl leaned forward, too, pressing against Kent. As he bent forward to pull the books from the container, her hand flicked upward, hesitated a moment at his jacket pocket, then dropped back. The movement was so slight that Kent did not notice it. There was a tight elastic top on the container that resisted his efforts. At last he got two books out and leaned back.

Kent held the two mystery books so that the girl could see the gaudy covers. She studied both of them for a minute or so, then selected one with a stricken blond girl looking very dead lying at the lower edge of the cover. Back of her, on a white wall, was the shadow of a man. Kent did not approve of the

cover but he knew this author wrote well. He always wrapped up all the details in the last chapter, no dangling loose ends.

"Good judgment," he said approvingly as he handed her the book.

The C-97 was now well up and on her way. Kent adjusted their seats. The girl opened the book and started reading. Kent turned to page four and became absorbed in his book.

Asko did not actually read the words on the page. Out of the corner of her eye she was watching Ridder, who was seated across the aisle and one seat back. When was he going to make his move? She was impatient and irritated. She had never had much faith in Ridder. She knew he had come aboard prepared. She could see a bulge under his coat on the right side. But suppose he lost his nerve? She turned a page to make it appear she was reading.

Ridder glanced back toward the washroom. In a C-97 the passengers rode facing toward the rear. Asko decided he was nervous and undecided. He had not adjusted his seat to a comfortable position and his seat belt was still fastened. Kent glanced up from his book. She turned another page and stared at the type intently.

"Any bodies yet?" he asked with a smile.

She blinked and held the book closer. "No," she said, and returned his smile. The instant he returned to his book her eyes became watchful and she half-turned her head so that she could watch Ridder.

Ridder unfastened his seat belt. He looked back at the airman and the Wac who were standing just beyond the washroom door. They were pouring orange juice into paper cups racked in a container. He waited until the airman and the Wac started serving the orange juice. They came down the aisle passing out paper cups. The Wac stopped beside Ridder

and smiled. Her eyes were blue and her hair was genuine blond, but Ridder wasn't interested.

"No, thanks," he mumbled.

The Wac moved on. Ridder got out of his seat and walked slowly back to the washroom. Kent and the girl took orange juice. He carefully marked his place by turning down the corner of a page. She closed the book without marking her place and shoved it back of her. Kent sipped his juice. The girl took a deep swallow. She seemed nervous, and Kent wondered if it would help if he talked to her. She seemed to sense his interest and took another swallow of juice, then flattened the book on top of her handbag and opened it. Kent went back to his own book.

Asko settled down in her seat. From now on it would be a matter of waiting. Ridder stayed in the washroom longer than he should have, but then he was a fool and not a trained worker. When he came out, she watched him closely. The bulge was gone from under his coat. She hoped everything would go as planned. It would be a bother and an added danger to have to put plan two into operation. Plan two had its risky elements. Everything now depended upon the young officer seated beside her. Sooner or later he would go back to the washroom. This was a long flight and so neat a young officer would want to freshen up.

She was annoyed at Ridder. He should have gone to the washroom before the orange juice was served. She could have spilled some of her orange juice on the officer's sleeve. That would have sent him to the washroom. Now her cup was empty and lying at her feet on the floor. She would have to wait until the box lunches were served.

The book Kent was reading began to bore him. There was little challenge to the reader, and there was no menace to the

private eye who was doing the detecting, and Kent had already decided he knew who was responsible for dumping the corpse in the detective's bedroom. He closed the book and shoved it into the container. Going forward to the control room would be more interesting than reading a dull book. He excused himself and eased past the girl.

Asko watched Kent walk forward. She moved one foot and slid his camera case toward her. Turning sidewise, as though seeking a more comfortable position, she reached down. The bag was unlocked. She turned the catch and lifted the lid. There was a camera inside. There was no leather case on the camera and its metal edges showed wear. It measured perhaps five inches by three. It could contain quite a few papers. She lifted it by its strap and decided it was not heavier than it should be. She moved it aside. There was a light meter and several filter cases.

Her hand moved to the pocket on the outside of the bag. She opened it and counted ten rolls of film in boxes. The boxes were sealed and she knew she could not open all of them. She turned her attention back to the camera. If Barstow returned while she was looking at the camera, she would say that she was interested in cameras, that she took pictures herself. Her training made her suspicious of the camera. It would make an ideal hiding place for papers, orders, or instructions. She could talk intelligently about photography. It had been a part of her training. She tilted the camera and glanced at the small window where the frame numbers showed. There was no number showing but the indicator told her that there was a film in the camera.

She lifted the camera and with a quick push opened the back. With a finger she lifted the paper backing over the film. There was nothing inside the camera between the lens and the

film. She snapped the camera closed and lowered the lid on the bag. With a quick shove of her foot she pushed the bag back where it had been.

When Kent returned after an hour of flying the ship he found his seat mate drowsing. He eased past her and leaned back. Flight lunches would soon be served. Kent had met the Wac whose name was Leslie and the airman called Andy. He dug his flight-lunch ticket out of his pocket. Andy and Leslie were loading their arms with lunch boxes.

Kent had liked the commander. Major Breen was a World War II bomber pilot. His navigator, Captain Tyson, had flown missions during the Korean War. The copilot, Captain Martin, was a youngster with no missions to his credit. The only member of the crew Kent would not have picked to work with was Sergeant Meek, the flight engineer. Meek was a nervous sort. He gave Kent the impression he didn't like visitors up forward, even a brother flier.

Kent Barstow seldom wasted time thinking about himself. But meeting Captain Martin reminded him that he was only a first lieutenant when others with less service were captains and majors. Spud did not have so much service and he was a captain. He had to admit that if he had gone after promotion he probably would have gotten it. He had asked for duty to his own liking and he had the things he wanted to do, such as testing the hot jets. But he had shifted around a lot and that did not get a man more brass.

Andy halted beside the seat, his arms filled with lunch boxes. The girl's eyes opened at once and she smiled up at him. He placed a box in her lap and she handed him her slip. Andy passed a box across to Kent and took his slip.

The girl quickly opened her box. Kent decided he was hungry enough to eat all of his lunch but he did not hurry.

He thought idly, she probably was hungry most of the time before she married her airman so now she still gets excited over food.

He opened his box. There was a can of orange juice in one end wedged in between two sandwiches and a container of fruit salad. Kent passed the can to Andy, who opened it with an opener he carried. The girl held up her can. Andy punched two triangular holes in the top and passed it back. When she put the can back into her box, she spilled a little of the juice and glanced quickly at Kent. He smiled reassuringly.

The girl opened a chicken sandwich, then started working on the lid of a container of salad dressing. She pried at the lid awkwardly with her spoon. The lid came free suddenly and the greasy dressing splattered as the spoon flipped upward. A large blob of dressing landed on Kent's jacket sleeve.

The girl looked horrified. She jerked a paper napkin from her box and started to wipe off the dressing. "I'm so sorry." She seemed about to start crying. Kent pulled his arm away from the napkin. All she was accomplishing was to spread the thick dressing into a big stain.

"Just an accident," Kent said quickly. "I'll go back to the washroom and use a wet towel on it."

"I've ruined your nice coat." Her voice was high and strained.

Kent set his box on the floor and got to his feet. Across the aisle Ridder had turned around. His eyes stared out of a pasty white face as he looked at Kent. The girl had turned. She gave Ridder a quick stabbing glance. Ridder dropped his eyes to his unopened lunch box.

Andy had moved down the aisle and stood watching. "Give it to me, sir. I have some stuff in the washroom that will take off the grease and not leave a trace."

"Thanks," Kent answered. "But all I need to do is to wipe off the grease with a wet cloth. I'll send it to the cleaners when I get to base."

"No trouble at all, sir," Andy answered cheerfully. He held out his hand.

Kent unbuttoned his jacket and slipped out of it. He handed it to Andy. He felt uncomfortable because the girl was so badly upset over a little thing like a grease spot. He wanted to reach down and pat her arm. But he did nothing more than smile at her as he seated himself and reached for his lunch box. She was regaining her composure.

"So clumsy of me," she said in a low voice.

Kent laughed. "Forget it. Andy will clean it up in a few minutes."

Ridder sat hunched over in his seat. He opened his lunch box and started fumbling inside it. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead.

Kent looked under the lid of the top sandwich. The filling was sliced chicken. He wasn't surprised that the girl had wanted salad dressing. He liked dressing on a chicken sandwich. Picking up the salad container, he pulled the tab upward, opening the cup. He passed it across to the girl.

"Have some of mine, yours is on the floor." He grinned at her.

The girl took the container and dipped into it with her spoon. At that moment the plane shuddered and there was a muffled burst of sound. Kent raised up and looked back. The washroom door was sagging open and wisps of gray smoke curled out of it. Captain Tyson burst out of the cockpit and halted at the sagging door. He peered inside, then stepped quickly back.

Kent felt a small hand gripping at his arm and he heard the girl's voice demanding excitedly, "What happened?"

Kent did not answer. He was listening to the engines. One of them had conked out, and the prop on the one next to it was running wild, screaming like a siren. He knew that it was beyond control and would spin free in seconds. When it did, the blades might very well rip through the fuselage. He could not warn the others but he could do something for the girl. He caught her roughly by the shoulders and shoved her down on the floor between the seat. She fought him wildly until he bent down and shouted, "Stay down and you'll be safe!"

He shoved past the girl and headed toward Tyson who had been joined by Meek. Tyson moved into the washroom. He was backing out again when Kent got to the broken door. He had his arms around Andy and was dragging the boy out of the room. Kent looked past the captain and saw a gaping hole in the outside wall of the small room. Then he reached down and caught hold of Andy's feet. He and Tyson carried the boy forward and laid him on a bench. Meek remained outside the broken door, staring into the washroom.

"Someone planted a bomb aboard." Tyson's voice was tight, his mouth twisted into an angry scowl.

"Anything I can do?" Kent asked.

"Go forward and relieve Breen. Send him back here," Tyson answered.

Kent went forward. When Breen saw him he gave Martin the word to take over and leaned toward Kent. Kent explained briefly and told the commander Tyson needed him. Breen got out of his seat and Kent took his place. Breen spoke to Martin over the intercom. "Barstow is an old head; let him take over." He turned and hurried away.

Martin's face glistened with sweat. Quick relief showed in

his eyes as Kent took over. This was his first brush with trouble and he was frightened. The great ship was fighting her head. Her two port motors were running smoothly but she was desperately out of balance and underpowered. She was loaded to capacity with passengers and cargo, possibly overloaded by commercial carrier standards.

"What do we do now?" Martin asked over the intercom.

"Keep her level. Go down on the deck and take advantage of updrafts from the water." Kent's voice was calm, almost cold. He had been in worse spots than this before and pulled out of them. At a time like this his rigid combat training turned him into a nerveless machine.

"We got a heck of a long way to go," Martin said. "We're past the point of no return."

"Breen will dump the cargo and baggage as soon as he and Tyson fix Andy up. This is a home-loving old girl, Captain. she'll take us in."

"Who'd want to blast a carrier?" Martin asked.

Kent did not answer. He had a very definite idea who wanted to blast that washroom. Anger began to smoulder inside him. Up until now this had been a personal matter between himself and people he did not know and had never seen. He recalled the bloody gash on Andy's cheek, and scowled. This made things different. Andy, a good kid, and a boy who had nothing at all to do with him, had been mangled, possibly killed. From now on he'd fight as nasty as the unseen agents who wanted to kill him.

Breen came back to check with Kent and Martin. He was well satisfied with the way Kent was handling the ship. He agreed they should be down close to the water. Kent looked up at the commander.

"Thinking of ditching her?" he asked.

"No," Breen answered grimly. "I'm taking her in." He hunkered down close to Kent. "We're dumping all cargo, even carry-on bags."

Kent thought of his camera and the film in it. He had to get the film and the bottle of lotion. He leaned close to Breen. "I have papers in my bag I'll have to salvage," he said.

Breen nodded. "I'll take over," he said.

Kent turned the controls over to the commander and moved back. When he entered the passenger compartment, Tyson was speaking calmly to the passengers over the loud-speaker.

"All baggage has to go overboard. Put your carry-on bags in the aisle where we can get them. Leslie will instruct you and help you with your survival gear."

Sergeant Meek and Wac Leslie stood beside Tyson. Leslie smiled at the faces turned toward them. Meek frowned and fidgeted.

Kent reached his seat. The girl was crouched down in her seat. Her eyes were very big. She reminded Kent of a frightened doe he had once seen in a park. He slid past her and sat down.

"Everything is under control," he said calmly.

She clenched her hands in her lap and did not look at him. Kent half-turned so that his back was to the girl. He bent down and opened the camera bag. Lifting the camera out, he quickly freed the film roll and rewound the loose end. He sealed it quickly, then opened his other case and felt around for the lotion bottle. When he located it he slipped the roll and the bottle into his pants pocket.

"Excuse me," he said as he turned back. "I'll be needed up ahead." He moved into the aisle and started toward the cockpit. Leslie was telling the passengers what to do as he passed her.

Asko frowned as she watched him go. There had been

something in the camera. It had been hidden in the roll of film. She would have to work fast when they reached Honolulu. The C-97 lurched sharply, then righted herself. The thought hit her, as the big ship slowly struggled to regain level flight, that she might not reach Honolulu. Anger against Ridder burned inside her. He had bungled the job.

Ridder sat crouched down in his seat, sweat pouring from every part of him. He was a good blaster, the best in the business. But he hadn't known enough about the construction of an aircraft. The charge he had used was right for an ordinary room, but something had gone wrong. It wasn't his fault. He tried to listen to Leslie's instructions coming over the loud-speaker.

"Remove your shoes. I will inspect all life jackets. If you have trouble putting on your jacket, just wait for me, I'll be along to help you. The commander tells me there is no immediate danger and I believe him."

Kent moved into the cockpit and sat down close to Breen. The commander was husky and tough but this was a job that could wear any man out. He was certain that Breen was not sure of Martin. The kid was fine but he had never been in a tight spot before. Breen leaned toward him and nodded toward the copilot's seat.

"Could you relieve Martin? We need another officer back with the passengers."

Kent nodded. He moved around beside Martin. Breen was talking to the captain over the intercom, explaining what had to be done back in the passenger compartment, making it sound very important. Martin got out of his seat and Kent took his place.

Kent glanced at the instrument panel as he adjusted his headphones. They were down on the deck. He glanced out

through the wind screen. There was a heavy sea running, good for updrafts but deadly if they had to ditch.

Breen had been in touch with his base. Air Rescue was rushing planes to meet the C-97. They would be loaded with supplies they could drop. The C-97 had her own rafts and survival equipment, but might have trouble making use of it. The Coast Guard had a ship five hundred miles to the rear. The decision was Breen's, he could turn back and ditch close to the Coast Guard ship or he could go on and try to save the big ship. Kent knew that Breen had made his decision at the beginning: he was going on.

The C-97 was flying two hundred feet above the water at reduced speed of one hundred sixty knots per hour, half her normal cruising speed. There was a problem of fuel. He spoke to Breen, "Got enough juice?"

Breen gave him a quick look. His face was drenched with sweat and glistened softly. "We'll have to shave it close, but we'll have enough." A chuckle came over the phone. "Might even have ten minutes left."

That was the way with a veteran like Breen. You flew her in. There had to be fuel enough. He was the master and he was in control. He would make his big ship come through.

As they roared along, Kent's mind kept coming back to the blast. He knew a lot more than any other member of the crew. Breen figured someone had slipped a bomb aboard at Travis, a time bomb set to go off after they had reached the point of no return. This did not fit Kent's way of thinking. That bomb had been meant for him and in some way it had missed fire. He was certain it was himself, and not Andy, that the killer was after. The incident of the salad dressing kept popping up. If Andy hadn't been right there, Kent would have taken his jacket to the washroom. That brought him to little Mrs.

Hanson. It was absurd to connect her with murder. She just did not fit, but he knew he'd have to suggest to someone that they question her closely.

Tyson was busy at his navigation charts. He had a part in the struggle to keep the big ship on course. Martin came forward and reported that the cargo had all been dumped along with the carry-on baggage. The ship was handling better and Breen wanted to give Martin a chance to learn about flying a C-97 on two engines. He called over to Kent.

"Might be a good time to let Martin take over."

Kent understood. "Good idea," he said. "I'll go back and see if Leslie needs any help."

The passengers were calm. The dependents and civilian travelers were frightened and nervous but Leslie had done a wonderful job. It was hard not to take heart after looking into her cheery face and listening to her kidding remarks. The military men had been trained to face battle conditions. They sat and waited, refusing to show how they felt.

Kent walked back to his seat. Leslie had things well in hand. He glanced at a man seated across the aisle. He was a civilian and he was the most frightened man Kent had ever seen. His face was a muddy-green color and beaded with sweat. Kent stepped past Mrs. Hanson and sat down. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. She looked tiny and scared. He shrugged his shoulders. She couldn't be mixed up in this.

The C-97 plodded along. Two aircraft of Air Rescue appeared and eased in beside and above her. Another C-97 caught up with them and dropped in behind. Kent stirred restlessly. He hated to stay on the side lines while his brother officers were fighting to make it through. He glanced down and spotted a corner of the girl's handbag poking out from under the edge of her flaring skirt. She had clung to her small belong-

ings. It did not matter. The bag could not have weighed more than a couple of pounds.

Breen and Martin kept the ship on a level keel. They would be carefully checking their fuel supply. He got out of his seat and went forward. Sitting beside a blank wall and not being able to see anything at all got on his nerves. Up in the nose he could see. When he reached the cockpit he saw that they were flying less than two hundred feet above the big waves. Breen looked fagged. His face was lined and showed signs of strain. He glanced at the fuel gauges. The supply was very low. Breen glanced up at him and Kent knelt beside the commander.

"Figure we'll have a gallon or two left when we get in." Breen had noticed Kent checking the fuel gauges.

Kent grinned back. "Ample," he said.

Presently they sighted land ahead. Breen started to nurse the big ship up to a safer altitude for landing. They climbed to five hundred feet and hung there as they circled Hickam and headed in for a landing. The circle had been necessary because the port landing gear was damaged and had to be lowered with hand jacks, a slow process.

Kent could see field ambulances and rescue jeeps with fire-foam tanks moving out to the flight line. He took Martin's place and the captain joined Meek at the manual lowering of the battered landing gear.

"Those wheels better be down," Breen muttered grimly. "This is it."

His gauges showed no fuel, but the two radials were pounding away. A call came from Martin, "Landing gear clear."

The runway swept toward them as they settled down. One engine sputtered and faltered, then went out. There was a slight jarring shudder. Brakes screamed and the giant ship swerved a little, then righted and rolled ahead, her rubber on

solid ground. Breen relaxed and leaned back. Without a word exchanged Kent took over and brought the ship to a stop.

There was bedlam around the C-97 as the passengers poured out. Everyone was wet with sweat. All were wildly happy to be on the ground. Kent waited and walked to Operations with the crew. Andy was conscious and seemed to be free from pain. Breen and Kent stood by while he was loaded into an ambulance before turning toward the terminal.

Kent spent a little time in an office with Breen. He signed a part of the report. When he reached the lounge he saw that the passengers off the C-97 were being held in a group. He guessed Security and Intelligence were on the job. He spotted a colonel who had a list in his hand that looked like the passenger list. He knew it was time to yell for help to Colonel Jefferys' boys, but he should report to the officer in charge first.

He stood looking over the group of passengers. He was wondering about the girl who had sat beside him. He could not locate her in the crowd. He changed position and checked carefully. She just wasn't there.

Kent approached the colonel with the list. "You have a Mrs. Hanson on the passenger list?" he asked.

The colonel looked at him sharply, then scanned the list. "Yes, there's a Mrs. Hanson, destination Tokyo."

"Where is she?" Kent asked.

"Must be here," the colonel answered. "We rounded them all up except a Lieutenant Barstow who was helping the crew."

"I'm Barstow," Kent said. "But Mrs. Hanson isn't in that crowd."

CHAPTER 7

Business as Usual

KENT answered the same questions asked of all the passengers, but as he had helped the crew he was asked to file a separate report on the action in bringing the C-97 in safely. Major Breen would certainly be recommended for honors. Until he was able to contact Colonel Jefferys' men Kent could not offer much in the way of information.

But he thought he detected the hand of Intelligence in much that happened. He was questioned closely as to the appearance of Mrs. Hanson and he was asked about a civilian who had also dropped out of sight before he could be questioned. He was told that his flight plans need not be interrupted. He had seat space on another C-97 due to leave Hickam the next morning.

There were some things he had to do at once. He would need a few things to replace the personal belongings and clothing he had lost when the baggage and cargo were dumped. He hurried to the BX as soon as he was free. He bought a cheap bag and a few things he would need before he had time to shop in Tokyo, if he was given any time there. As he shopped, his mind was busy going over the events of the past few hours.

Someone had spotted him and tried to kill him. They would

try again, he was sure of that. Tomorrow he would leave the territory of the United States and the rules would be different. He and the unseen agents would be on an equal footing, with nothing in his favor. He wondered if the girl would attach any importance to his removing the film from his camera. He decided she would because she was a most extraordinary person. She certainly was a terrific actress. In spite of the fact that she had tried to blow him up, he admired her. He wouldn't have believed that a tiny girl like Mrs. Hanson would have so much courage. Of course, she wasn't Mrs. Hanson. He wondered what her real name was. Then he got to thinking about the bottle of lotion. He wondered if she had seen him put it into his pocket. He had turned his back to her. She was certain to have seen what he was doing with the camera but might have missed the little bottle. He had better play it safe. He bought an identical bottle of shaving lotion and put a small pencil mark on it so that he could identify it. He also bought an identical roll of 120 film.

When he reached his room at the BOQ the first thing he did, after locking his door, was to remove the roll of film from its package. He broke the seal and resealed the roll with a bit of the loose tape, making the seal look as much like the seal on the code roll as he could. He then put the roll of film and a bottle of real lotion into his handbag along with a tube of toothpaste, a razor, and a can of instant-shaving lather. The original film and lotion bottle he left in his pants pocket.

Security on the base was on the alert, but he was taking no chances. The girl and a man had disappeared so there must be a gang working in Honolulu. A small oriental girl would have little trouble getting lost in the Islands. The man would have more trouble. Kent was bone-weary and wanted to lie down for a couple of hours' sleep. He had to decide whether

he would contact Intelligence here at Hickam or wait until he reached Tokyo.

Before he came to any decision there was a knock on his door. He opened the door cautiously, feeling a little foolish when he eased to one side and swung the door back only enough to see out. A colonel stood in the hall frowning at the door. Kent swung it wide open.

"Come in, Colonel," he said.

The colonel's frown vanished and he smiled. Ignoring the cautious way he was greeted, he said, "I am Colonel Dean, AFCIN. We were a bit worried about you, Barstow."

"Major Breen handled everything without too much sweat," Kent said cautiously.

The colonel nodded. "I understand you had a good look at a couple of the passengers who disappeared after your plane landed."

"That's right. I had a good chance to observe the girl. I didn't pay too much attention to the man. Have you caught them?"

"We think we have the man. Would you take a look at him for identification?"

"Be glad to, though he may not be one I noticed," Kent said. He was thinking of the frightened passenger who had sat across the aisle.

"We'll take a little ride," the colonel said.

Kent decided he would wait and let Colonel Dean make the first move regarding his mission. Dean might not know anything more than that Kent was on a special mission. If he did, he was playing it very careful. They left the BOQ and drove off the base to a pier lined with warehouses. There was a decided smell of pineapple in the air. The colonel parked close to a warehouse and they got out.

Two Air Police stood guard before a door. They saluted and stepped back when the colonel and Kent approached. The colonel opened the door and stepped back to let Kent pass. The room Kent entered was small, possibly an office. There was a long bench and several chairs in the room. A blanket-draped form lay on the bench. The colonel stepped forward and pulled back the blanket. Kent stared down at the face of a man. It was not a pleasant thing to see. The dead man had been in the water but before that he had been in a fight. But Kent recognized him. He was the scared man who had sat across the aisle.

"That's the man who sat across from me," he said.

The colonel flipped the blanket back into place. "We wanted to get an identification of our own before we turn him over to the police." Dean smiled. "They have their ways of handling a murder, we have ours." He turned his back on the bench.

They left the small room and the colonel spoke to one of the police. "Notify city police and have them check with me."

The officer snapped a salute. "Yes, sir," he said.

Kent followed the colonel to the car and they got in. The colonel said nothing on the way back to the BOQ. When Kent got out of the car, the colonel smiled.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," he said.

As he watched the colonel drive away Kent wondered what would have happened if he had said two words, "Black Rose." He did not know why he had not given the code name and asked for help. He was perhaps being foolishly stubborn.

When he got to his room, he looked into his bag. The roll of film and the lotion bottle were gone. Everything in the bag was in place but he had a feeling the bag had been searched. He wasn't accustomed to paying much attention to how he packed things, but he did have a few personal habits. He always

reversed his shirts so that they would lie even. Now the collars of the two shirts he had bought both faced the same way.

Kent closed the bag. He turned to the door and examined the lock. It was an efficient lock of the Yale type which snapped shut when the door was closed. He had used his key to open it. He sat down to think things over. He felt a sense of satisfaction. He had fooled them with the film and the bottle. After they had checked both they would stop thinking the film important.

Kent was aware that Hickam was an ordinary base with the usual security force. This was not a Strategic Air Command base with flight lines serving stratojet bombers or hot jet interceptors or fighters. Those bases had really tight security. The flight line was probably guarded closely, but the BOQ and the barracks area would not be closely policed.

Kent had never carried his service revolver on him except when flight duty required it. It had been in his bag when the cargo was ditched. When he reached Tokyo he would ask for an issue. He was fast getting over the idea that nothing could happen to him while he was with his military organization. He should not have been in danger aboard a MATS plane. Someone, perhaps a well-organized group, knew he was staying overnight in this room. They had already visited his quarters.

If he alerted Colonel Dean, a trap might be set to catch any intruder who tried to enter during the night. He decided to think it over at dinner. He left his quarters and walked across to the officers' mess. When he entered the dining room he spotted Colonel Dean. There were a number of officers having dinner but the colonel was alone. He saw Kent at once and motioned for him to come to his table. As Kent walked across

the room he wondered if Colonel Dean had come to dinner expecting to meet him.

"Sit down, Barstow," the colonel said.

Kent seated himself. A waitress came with a menu and he ordered Southern fried chicken. The waitress left and Kent considered how best to approach the colonel.

"I was wondering," he began. "Do you have anything special on me?"

The colonel finished chewing on a piece of steak. He swallowed slowly. "We have a special code sheet from Washington. Came in before you landed."

Not much help, but it was a hint. "Someone went through my baggage while I was off with you," he said.

The colonel's affable expression changed instantly. It became cold and intent. Kent was reminded of Colonel Jefferys.

"Anything missing?"

Kent smiled. "Nothing of importance."

"You think your visitors might return?"

"I don't know," Kent said honestly. "My service revolver was in the baggage we dumped." He paused.

"I'll have a gun delivered to your quarters." The colonel gave his attention to his steak. After a bit he looked up at Kent. "We were to leave you strictly alone, but we are to assure your boarding that plane for Tokyo."

"It seems to be no secret to some people where I am going. They also seem to hope I won't make it," Kent said.

"You want a stake-out on the BOQ?"

"Just send over a gun," Kent answered.

"I can call in the security police," the colonel said. "We had hoped we wouldn't have to make too big a production out of it."

"Just send over a gun," Kent said grimly. He was sure now that the colonel had been given only a limited amount of information on him.

His chicken came and he ate his dinner. The colonel was not the prying type. Their talk was about things removed from the bomb blast and the hunt going on for the missing girl. Kent left the club after finishing his dinner. He went directly to his room.

At the door of his room he hesitated. He was getting jumpy, he decided. But he listened for a minute or so before inserting his key. He shoved the door open and moved into the room. His hand went quickly to the light switch. The room flooded with light. He had no visitors.

He sank into an easy chair and stretched out his legs. He did not intend to let himself get wound up. This was no different from a night before a test flight. He sat for a long time before getting up and starting to get ready to go to bed. It was early. He would have enjoyed a swim on Waikiki Beach and a few hours in a downtown club, but that would have been asking for trouble if an organized gang was after him. While he was taking the pins out of his new pajamas a corporal arrived with a package. It contained a service revolver and cartridges.

As Kent loaded the revolver he felt a sudden urge to call Colonel Dean. He had been foolish and stubborn in not asking to have police protection. But he didn't make the call. He placed the revolver under his pillow. He needed a long night's rest and he meant to have it.

Kent sat in his pajamas and frowned. He had a strange feeling of uneasiness. This business of dodging unseen dangers was a lot different from going up against a machine. A machine could be dangerous, but at least you knew from what source it

came. He stared at the locked door. Someone had opened that door and entered without much trouble. Well, he thought grimly, at least I can apply one rule I know well. Get set for any possibility.

Getting to his feet, he picked up a chair and carried it to the door. He spent five minutes balancing its back delicately against the knob so that it would fall to the floor if he knob was moved.

Turning off the light, he lay back in bed and relaxed. His long training had conditioned him so that he had control over his reflexes. His tired body responded and within five minutes he was asleep.

Kent was awakened by a loud crash. For a few seconds he did not move. But his brain snapped clear. The chair. His hand slid under his pillow as he kicked aside the sheet and blanket. He lay on his side with the revolver ready. Light came through a window beside his bed. He could see the chair lying on the floor. The door appeared to be closed. Suddenly the situation seemed so impossible that he laughed. He had been thinking about dacoits and stiletto men. But dacoits with their death nooses came in through windows. Perhaps the dagger men came in through doors.

Getting out of bed, he walked to the wall switch and turned on the lights. The door was locked. There could have been a slight earth tremblor. He shrugged his shoulders. Someone had turned that knob, and the resulting noise had scared him off.

He looked at his watch. It was three o'clock in the morning. Kent was wide awake and the bed did not look inviting. He had had a long sleep and a sound one. He got a book that a former officer had left on his dresser and settled down to read.

The book was a paper-bound edition of *Flattop* and he became absorbed in it.

At seven o'clock he showered and shaved. He shoved the revolver inside his belt and closed his bag. Breakfast, then off to Operations. He knew that if his revolver was noticed when he boarded the MATS flight he would be given a real shake-down. There was a MATS rule against taking firearms aboard. Leaving his key at the desk, he paid for his room and headed for Operations.

Kent was at the air terminal two hours before flight time. He checked in and handed over his bag, then went to the terminal café for breakfast. Glancing at his flight number, he saw that it did not indicate any special preference.

Later, as he waited at the gate, he looked over the crowd ready to board the Tokyo-bound C-97. He spotted Colonel Dean and two lieutenants standing apart from the crowd. The colonel did not appear to notice Kent. There was no shy little girl who seemed to need help this time. The four women passengers all had husbands and children with them. There were no civilians present; all appeared to be servicemen. If there were any Intelligence men going along, they would pass as members of some active outfit. He wouldn't be able to identify them.

Kent boarded the plane and found a seat beside a young airman who did not look to be more than eighteen years of age. He settled back and waited for the big radials to start warming up. He was off to Tokyo. Thirty-seven hundred miles of water lay between. In Tokyo the game would really begin to take on a fast pace. He was sure that this ship had been checked and that every passenger had been carefully screened. He decided at the first opportunity he'd chuck the revolver into the small musette bag he carried. He felt relaxed and at ease.

Flying at eighteen thousand feet, the C-97 found smooth air and rode it with an ease that added monotony to the trip for the seventy-odd passengers aboard. This was a chance to get some of the sleep he had planned on enjoying. He let his seat back and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER 8

Danger in the Street

THE C-97 landed at Tokyo International. The flight had been uneventful. Kent had handed his declaration of personal belongings to a Japanese government girl and was ready to leave the plane. He had little to declare; most of the things he had started out with were at the bottom of the Pacific, including his camera.

The big plane taxied to its parking spot. The preferred passengers hurried off, followed by the servicemen. Everyone was eager to get into Tokyo after the monotonous trip. To the old hands in the Far East this was a return to an exotic city whose way of life they had come to love. To the newcomers, primed by stories from the old hands, adventure beckoned. To Kent this was a return to a city where he and Spud had enjoyed many exciting adventures.

Kent waited at the baggage barrier for his bag. He had slipped the gun back inside his belt and was conscious of its bulk against his stomach. He had the roll of film and the lotion bottle in a jacket pocket. He was impatient to get to his hotel and treat the film. In a short time he would know the score, possibly his exact destination.

The bags were unloaded and quickly checked by the Japanese customs men. Kent handed over his check stub and got his bag. He walked out into the main waiting room. The

first sign he saw was over a wide window: **BANK OF AMERICA**. It was as though he were still in California. He waited in line for his turn to change his United States currency into military scrip. He would also get a small amount of Japanese yen for immediate use. When his turn came, he passed over his bills and asked for military scrip plus five thousand yen. The yen was bulky, mostly in thousand-yen notes. It exchanged at a rate of three hundred and sixty yen for a dollar. The military scrip was all paper, even a nickel was paper.

High-ranking officers crowded about several newsmen who had come in from Taiwan. Kent looked around the lobby as he pocketed his money. He moved to the passport window and had his visa checked and a blank page stamped. He was now a guest of Japan, subject to her laws and codes and dependent upon her for protection, except when he was actually on a base or performing a military duty.

Picking up his bag, he headed for the nearest exit. When he stepped through the doors, he was no longer under the protection of Air Force Security. He was on his own in the world's largest city. Grinning broadly, he crossed a wide expanse of cement to a curb where a line of taxicabs waited.

There were seventy-yen cabs, eighty-yen cabs, and ninety-yen cabs. The price was fixed by the size of the cab. The seventy-yen cabs were small cars, able to seat two passengers. Kent headed toward one of them. It was always an adventure to ride in one of the seventy-yen cabs. The drivers made up for their lack of speed by their agility in dodging between trucks and cutting in on other drivers. The driver exposed big, white teeth in a smile as he opened the cab door for Kent.

"Sanno Hotel," Kent said, and added, "I-so-i-de-ma-so." In Japanese that meant, "I am in a hurry." Kent knew there was

no need to urge the driver to hurry, but he wanted to be sure there would be no delays.

As they pulled away from the curb, he watched the people who got into cabs and he watched the parked cars. Several cabs and cars pulled out and dropped in behind his cab. He planned to have his driver take a side street when they had gone some distance. If he was being followed, he would know. The drive to the hotel was a long one and through some rough parts of the city.

There is very little smooth pavement on the streets of Tokyo. Bricks and stone slabs and even planking make up much of the pavement. The little cab bounced and bumped along at its top speed. The driver tooted and honked at every car and every person who got in his way. If he honked loud and often enough before he hit anyone, that person would be liable because he had given proper warning. The first question asked in a traffic accident case was, "How many times did you honk your horn before you hit this person?"

Kent kept looking back as they ducked and darted in and out of the traffic. He could not be sure whether or not the cab was being followed. The traffic was too heavy to spot a car. He decided to sit back and enjoy the drive for a while. He wouldn't get to visit any of the places he had always enjoyed, Ginza Street, the parks or the temples, but he could get the feel of Tokyo by just riding through it. He would have liked very much to eat at the Hana-No-Ki that night. The food and the music were wonderful there. After dinner he could go to the Mimatsu, a brassy cabaret with a sparkling floor show. He and Spud had gone there many times. At the Mimatsu there was always a loud name band, and singers who knew how to give American jazz a Japanese touch.

The American occupation forces had numbered and named

a few of the main streets, but most of the street signs were in Japanese. Kent remembered the times he had gotten lost in Tokyo, caught with a driver who could not speak English. That was always an adventure. He leaned back as they passed a mass of construction work being done in a cleared area.

"What are they building here?" he asked.

The driver waved a hand and started talking rapidly in Japanese. Kent leaned back and listened to the chatter. Suddenly the driver switched to English. He had thought, because Kent had spoken some Japanese, that he understood. "It is as you would say an apartment house."

Tokyo covers a large area because it is often shaken by earthquakes, and tall buildings were not so safe as one- and two-story structures. The quakes were much more severe and frequent than in Kent's home town, San Francisco. The traffic was beginning to thin somewhat. Kent decided this would be a good time to check on any car that might be following them. He leaned forward and spoke to the driver, "I think there may be a car following us. How about taking a side street, then coming back into this one?"

The driver looked startled, then he grinned and nodded. Kent got set to check the car behind them. Dusk had settled and the street lights were on, but they did not give much light. His driver darted in and out, working over to his left. He came to a narrow side street. Without slackening his speed he turned into the street, tires screaming and skidding. The cab righted and shot down the dark, tree-shaded alley. Kent had a glimpse of a big car which he thought was trying to turn into the alley. His cab made a sharp left turn and skidded around a corner. A few minutes later it turned left again and after a short run they were back again on the wide street they had left.

Kent leaned back. He was sure no big car or even a little one could have trailed them into the alley. The maneuver had been too fast. But he wasn't sure. If his driver had gone on down the alley, Kent could have spotted headlights of any car turning into the alley.

The cab barely missed a rickshaw pulled by a bicycle. Three Japanese girls were crowded together on the small box seat. Kent's driver swerved to the left honking wildly. At that moment a Dodge convertible with its top down swerved in beside the cab. Its right fender hit the rickshaw, spilling the girls into the street. It cut back sharply, forcing Kent's cab to swing in a tight turn toward the curb. His driver missed the curb and went plunging into an alley. Too late Kent realized that the driver of the Dodge meant to smash the cab. The big car had turned into the alley and was upon the little car before Kent could move. When the impact came, all he could do was to jerk open the left-hand door and dive. He hit the ground on his side and skidded over cobblestones and loose gravel, then his head struck a rock wall and a shower of lights burst before his eyes. But he wasn't out completely. He reached for his gun with one hand while with the other he tried to push himself to a sitting position. His groping hand found no gun. It had been jarred loose when he hit the pavement. His trouser leg had been ripped open from his belt to his knee and the flesh burned like fire. He thought of the roll of film and the plastic bottle. He groped for the film, thinking he could throw it away. His pocket was gone along with part of the trouser leg.

Above him he heard voices as he shook his head to clear it. The voices were speaking in Japanese and in English. One, a soft voice, sounded familiar.

"I have it," the soft voice said. "It fell out of his pocket."

Another voice cut in. It wasn't Japanese, Korean perhaps or Chinese, Kent couldn't quite identify it. Two men were standing over him. They gripped his shoulders and jerked him to his feet. He felt something hard shoved against his ribs and knew it was the barrel of a revolver. He shook his head again and his vision cleared.

There was a heavy-set man in front of him and one on each side. Little Mrs. Hanson was standing close to the convertible smiling at him. The little taxi was on its side, piled up against the far alley wall. Beside it lay the driver, his cap pushed far back on his head, his face turned toward Kent. His eyes were open but he did not move. The men beside Kent started shoving him toward the convertible.

Kent looked down the alley. It was very narrow, but many people must have seen the crash. Then he saw why no one had entered the alley. A man with a machine gun stood back of the convertible facing the entrance to the alley. Mrs. Hanson stepped aside, the smile still on her lips.

"We meet again, Lieutenant," she said.

Kent stared at her grimly. The man with the gun jabbed him hard.

"Get into the car," he ordered.

Kent was heaved through the door of the car. One of the men kept a grip on his arm and they both sat down hard. The other man ran around and entered on the far side. The girl got into the front seat, sliding past the wheel. The man who had the gun handed it to the fellow beside Kent. The muzzle again jabbed into his ribs.

"Get going," the girl snapped to the man who had handed over the gun. He cased in behind the wheel and instantly the car leaped away. The engine had been left running. Kent

wondered for a second what had happened to the man with the machine gun. The gang appeared to have deserted him. Then he began to think of the mess he was in himself, and he did not try to kid himself about what he was up against.

CHAPTER 9

Showdown

THE girl spoke to the driver in Chinese. When the driver answered, Kent caught the name Asko. At any rate, he now knew the girl's real name. The man pulled a length of silk cloth from a pocket. The girl passed it back and the man on Kent's right covered Kent's eyes with the cloth, knotting it tightly at the back of his head. A moment later Kent felt handcuffs snap around his wrists. After that the pressure of the gun barrel eased.

The convertible was moving fast, bouncing and jolting over rough pavement. The honking horns on the main street faded along with the traffic sounds. The street they were following had little car traffic on it. Suddenly Kent was jerked off the seat and forced down on the floor of the car. His position was uncomfortable. He lay face down with his manacled hands under him. In order to breathe he had to turn his head to one side. A pair of big, canvas-wrapped feet were planted in his back. Every time he tried to shift his position the feet smashed him down. He had an idea the man had been a professional wrestler or was one. No one but such a man could use his feet so expertly.

The car finally came to a halt. The door on Kent's right opened. The feet moved off his back as the man got out of the

car. Kent was pulled to a sitting position, then out of the car. His legs were so cramped he could barely stand on them.

"Inside," the girl said, and followed the command with a rapid flow of Chinese.

They walked a few steps along a stone walk. Kent was halted and his shoes roughly pulled from his feet. This seemed to indicate he was about to enter a Japanese house. He was pushed through a doorway and he felt mats under his bare feet. A man beside him shoved him across a room and pushed him down against a wall. He listened intently. At least two people had left the room. He hoped they would leave him alone for a little while. He needed desperately to get some plan of action worked out. He heard a man breathing. The sound came from across the room. The man appeared to be suffering from a cold or asthma.

As he sat there Kent took stock of his plight. The presence of the girl Asko indicated that this was the same gang that had tried to blow him up on the C-97, though he could not figure how she had gotten here so fast; possibly by commercial DC-7. It seemed hardly likely that they planned to let him live. They had the film, and if they learned the nature of his mission there was a slim chance they might not feel it necessary to kill him. The colonel's elaborate plan for announcing the monster would have lost its impact. He tried to get a little hope out of this possibility.

After a time several people entered the room. They seemed to be seating themselves on floor mats, judging by the sounds. Someone approached Kent and jerked the silk cloth off his head. The room was well lighted and Kent blinked. The girl Asko stood before him. His eyes moved from her and around the room. There was a low table and Asko's white handbag

lay on it. A dark-faced man sat beside the table; another, armed with a revolver, sat beside the door. Kent's gaze came back to Asko.

"There are some things we need to know," she said.

"Ask me." Kent stared up at the girl. She had a faint, almost amused smile on her lips. It seemed a shame that such a pretty girl should be mixed up in this very nasty business.

"Your orders. We have not found them."

Kent smiled at her. He decided now was the time to make his pitch. "You know I would not be carrying written orders." He knew at once that she believed him. He had made a reasonable statement.

"Then you will tell us."

Kent glanced past her. The man at the door seemed to be the only one present who was armed. A German Luger lay in his lap. The man beside the table was dressed in a short-sleeved shirt. His slacks were tight-fitting. Kent didn't think he even carried a knife.

"You know that I will tell you nothing." He stared up into her eyes. They seemed much darker than he had noticed on the plane. They stared back at him and there was no softness in them; they glinted like the eyes of a cat.

"You will tell us everything." She clapped her hands together twice.

A burly man stepped through the doorway. He must have been waiting just outside. Kent had seen a few men like him while on duty in Korea. He was short and thick-legged with a massive, hairy chest upon which his head sat without benefit of a visible neck. He shuffled across the mats and halted beside Asko, his arms folded across his chest. When the man looked at the girl, his slanting eyes gleamed hotly.

Kent stared up at the squat giant. He had to decide whether to give in fast or to make it look good. The fellow might very well start off by breaking an arm or a few ribs, but if he didn't hold out, the girl would not believe him.

"Kim can break fingers. He can break any bone I desire broken." Asko spoke softly. "He breaks them one at a time." She paused and waited.

"I can tell you only what I know, which isn't much." Kent pulled his feet in toward him. He knew quite a few judo tricks himself. He had taken the Air Force judo course under an expert. He had no illusions about handling the burly Kim with his hands fettered, but he meant to do what damage he could before the big fellow got hold of him.

"Talk!" Asko stepped back, and Kim moved forward.

"I am to make a test demonstration for the benefit of our neighbors in Korea and North China," Kent said.

"That we know," the girl answered. "We feel that your show will be successful. We intend to see that it is delayed so that our friends will not be frightened into abandoning plans we want carried out." She stared down thoughtfully at Kent. "We also wish to examine this monster. You will tell us where it is kept and how it is guarded."

Kent took a deep breath. He was in for it, after all. The people he was dealing with were fanatics, believing they could actually steal the monster. They were crazy. They knew a lot and they knew nothing. He was about to be smashed in an attempt to make him tell things he didn't know. Even if he told them how to develop the film, he was sure they would learn nothing they wanted to know.

"Those are things I do not know," he said coldly.

The girl stepped forward impatiently. She bent down until

her face was close to his. Her eyes were blazing and her breath came in short spurts.

"In one minute Kim will start breaking bones." She spat the words into his face.

She seemed to think that she could make him talk by staring into his eyes. Kent had a feeling that this was his last chance to live. He could lie by giving them a likely place, by telling them a yarn about how it was guarded. But they would go and then come back. He stared into the girl's eyes, trying to make her think he was giving in to her intent eyes. He had pulled his hands up against his chest. With all of the speed he could muster, he raised them and reached over the girl's head, bringing the chain down hard across the back of her neck. The short chain dug deep and pressed against her spine as he applied pressure.

"I'll break your neck!" he shouted, and gave the chain a hard jerk.

"No! No!" Asko screamed. Her body twisted and she raked at his face and shoulders with her long nails.

Kim had started to leap forward, but had halted. He could see that Kent could break the girl's neck. In that moment Kent snapped an order.

"Tell your gorilla to get out!"

He looked past Kim. The man at the door was on his feet, his Luger held ready. The man at the table just sat and watched, with no expression at all on his face.

The girl's body twisted but she stopped clawing at him. He knew he could break her slender neck, but he also knew he wouldn't do it. He was making a bluff. All he could hope for was that in her hardness she would believe a man in his danger would kill a girl. She started screaming in Chinese. The burly

Kim hesitated, then backed toward the door. He halted just outside the doorway and stood looking into the room. Asko kept on screaming at him. He turned and vanished. Kent kept the pressure tight as he got to his feet. He did not want her to faint but he did want her badly frightened.

"Tell your man to hand me his gun with the butt toward me," Kent ordered, and gave the chain a jerk. The girl sagged and he was afraid he had gone too far.

Asko, who was completely ruthless herself, was sure she faced imminent death. She talked fast. The man with the Luger reversed it and moved across the room, holding the gun with its butt toward Kent. The gun came closer. Kent's right hand opened and his fingers closed over the gun. With a quick movement he freed the girl and shoved her from him. She sank to the floor moaning. The guard started edging toward the door. Kent centered the Luger on his middle and the guard halted.

"Unlock these." Kent shook the cuffs at the guard.

The man hesitated. He looked down at the man seated at the table. He wasn't even watching the scene; he was looking at Asko. The guard moved to the table and reached for Asko's handbag. He opened it and dumped the contents on the table. A small automatic spilled out and beside it lay Kent's roll of film. The guard bent and picked up a pair of keys on a ring. He edged toward Kent, his eyes on the Luger. Fumbling, he managed to insert a key. One cuff dropped away. A moment later the pair rattled to the floor. Kent stepped aside and looked down at Asko. He had to decide whether to tie them all up or get out before Kim returned with reinforcements. He decided the best thing to do was to get out fast.

Asko stirred and shook her head. She opened her eyes and they blazed with fury as she looked up at Kent.

"Sorry I had to get rough," he said grimly. "But when you play games where you break people's bones you have to expect them to break a few of yours." He moved to the table and pocketed the automatic and the roll of film. The man at the table kept his eyes on Asko.

Kent backed out through the doorway after taking a look to make sure Kim was not lurking outside. He paused outside the door just long enough to slip into his shoes. As he pulled them on he heard the man at the table say, "I warned you that you should use more men. This will be bad for your record."

"We'll catch him!" Asko screamed. "When we do, Kim will tear him apart."

The man at the table laughed. "For your sake, I hope you do catch him."

Kent laughed as he ran down the path. At the end of the walk he found himself in a narrow alley between small houses. The earthen walk was no more than three feet wide in one direction, but wide enough for a car in the other. Kent decided that the wider lane led to a street. He headed that way on the run. There seemed to be no one at home in any of the houses. Not a single light shone back of the draped curtains that served as doors. Kent kept to the middle of the lane.

There was no way of telling how many blocks he walked and ran before he came to a wider street with a few lights along it. The street sloped downward, and far below Kent could see a neon street sign. He started running and kept on running until he was close to the sign. Then he heard a car on the street above him. Its motor was racing and it sounded like a big American car, possibly the Dodge convertible. He shoved the Luger into a pocket and moved close to a tall hedge. After

following the hedge for ten feet, he came to an opening. Moving through it, he stood behind the hedge and listened. He was glad that there were few dogs in Tokyo, and that those owned were always kept inside on a tether. Meat was so scarce that loose dogs seldom survived.

The car came down the street fast. There were three men and a girl in it. By his bulk Kent guessed that one of the men in the back seat was Kim. The girl riding beside the driver would be Asko. The car roared on down the street and vanished. Kent left his hiding place and again started to run. Within a few minutes the car came back, moving more slowly. It was the convertible, and Kent was able to spot a man in the back seat with a machine gun. He had ducked behind a wooden platform which was used during the day as a display table. The car turned off on a side street and Kent moved on.

Far below him he could see lights that he thought were the main business section of Tokyo. He headed that way. A few cars passed but he did not let any of the drivers see him. This was easy to accomplish because the street was lined with shrubs.

At last he came to a wide street where there was a sidewalk and plenty of traffic. He moved along watching for an unoccupied taxicab. He finally spotted one and waved it down. The driver swung to the curb and started to open the door. Then he saw Kent's torn uniform and began to shut the door. Kent grabbed it and jerked it open, then got into the cab. He leaned toward the startled driver.

"Sanno Hotel," he snapped.

"Yes, sir," the driver answered in unaccented English.

Kent leaned back with a sigh of relief. He had been lucky, his driver spoke English, and he knew where the Sanno Hotel

was located. But he looked back along the street as the cab bounced away. He saw no sign of a convertible. The cab-driver set a fast pace and treated Kent to the usual close misses with other cars. But Kent wasn't paying the least attention. He was content to sit back and relax.

CHAPTER 10

Black Rose

BY the time the taxi reached the gardens of the Sanno Hotel, Kent had made up his mind. He would contact Intelligence at the AF's Tokyo headquarters and he'd say "Black Rose" fast. He was ready to ask for all the security they had to offer. Twice in two days he had been lucky, but a man couldn't depend on luck. Also he had learned something he did not think Colonel Jefferys knew. A small group was very anxious to delay the demonstration. They wanted the Communist forces, probably in North Korea, to strike. They were afraid that if the aggressors knew their radar screen was useless they would cancel their plans.

There were other pressing needs for yelling for help. His passport was gone and so was all of his money. He had to have a new uniform and other clothing. After he had asked the driver to wait until he was able to get some yen, he glanced at his watch. It was exactly eleven o'clock.

As Kent crossed the lobby to the desk he was conscious of the stares of a number of military men lounging in easy chairs. At the desk a young Japanese gave him a smile. In true oriental manner he ignored Kent's torn uniform.

"I have lost my identification," Kent said. "I was held up by thugs. I need a hundred yen to pay my cab fare. I will establish identity later."

The clerk nodded as though he understood perfectly. Torn though it was, Kent's uniform was pass enough for him. He moved to the cash drawer and took out a sheaf of yen notes.

"Will a hundred be enough?" the boy asked politely.

"Until I am able to make a few contacts. I should have a reservation here. The name is Lieutenant Kent Barstow." Kent took the hundred-yen note and headed toward the entrance.

Before he paid the driver he got the name of the street where the cabby had picked him up, and some idea of that part of Tokyo. As he stepped back from the cab he said, "A-ri-ga-toh."

The driver smiled and answered with the English translation, "Thank you."

Kent ran up the steps and into the hotel. It would be best to call Intelligence from his room. The rooms at the Sanno all had phones. He was halfway across the lobby when he saw a familiar face. Spud Murphy was standing at the desk. He turned around as Kent came up behind him.

"Kent, you bum." There was evident relief in Spud's voice.

Kent smiled broadly as they shook hands. He was glad to see Spud. They might be allowed to work together from here on. "Your homely mug looks good to me," he said. "As soon as I get straightened out here we'll go to my room and talk."

"You're all set. We'll talk in my room." Spud had not missed the torn uniform and the lack of baggage. He was eager to hear Kent's story. He shoved Kent toward the elevator.

Spud's room was on the second floor. They entered and Kent sank into a chair. He eased the Luger out of his pocket and tossed it on the bed, then dropped the little automatic beside it. Spud stared at the German pistol and whistled.

"This is screwball mission number one," he said grimly.

"You were expecting me?" Kent asked.

"I was told to stay clear of you if you showed up here on time." Spud scowled. "I don't like blind missions. I like to know what I'm up against."

"I have to make a contact at once," Kent said. He got to his feet and walked to a desk where there was a phone. Spud settled himself on the edge of the desk and prepared to listen. Kent dialed a number he had memorized in connection with his code name. After a couple of rings at the other end a voice said, "Major Andrews speaking. AFCIN."

"Black Rose speaking," Kent answered.

"Where are you?" the major asked.

"Sanno Hotel. Room 211."

"Stay where you are. I'll be right down." The receiver at the other end clicked.

Spud grinned at him. "Real secret stuff," he said. "Suppose this line is bugged?"

"I don't care much if the line is tapped," Kent said. "I sure don't think it will make any difference, except to give away the code name. The gang that is after me seems to know all the answers anyway."

"Get yourself a shower," Spud said. "I'll rustle a uniform and stuff for you." He hesitated, then added wistfully, "Don't suppose you care to tell me what happened to you tonight."

"I guess we better wait until the major gets here," Kent said.

Kent and Spud had used each other's uniforms before. They were the same height and weight. All that had to be altered was the rank. That would pose no problem.

By the time Kent had showered, Spud had an outfit laid out. He got on the phone and located a set of bars from a friend. When he had finished, he turned to Kent.

"You lost everything?"

"Twice," Kent said grimly. "This time I lost all of my papers and my money."

"This has sure been crazy business. I get a dumb briefing and off I go. I'm supposed to be followed by gangs of hoodlums. Nobody follows me, they all take out after you." He picked up a 35-mm. camera off his desk. "They give me this camera and tell me to take pictures. I'm to give the film to you. I've never taken a picture in my life. Make any sense out of that?"

"Yes. I make plenty of sense out of it," Kent answered. "Did they give you anything else?"

"Like what?"

"Like a bottle of after-shave lotion?"

Spud stared at him. "Heck, no. I use an electric razor."

Kent considered this. Colonel Jefferys had sent an extra set of orders along but neither those nor the film in his pocket was any help without the chemical solution. He buttoned his shirt and slipped into Spud's trousers. He was thinking back, checking everything he could remember that had happened after the convertible ran the cab into the alley. The plastic bottle hadn't been in the girl's handbag—that meant it was probably still in the alley. He turned to Spud.

"You got a flashlight?"

"Sure," Spud answered. "What gives?"

"It will take the major better than a half-hour to get here. We're going for a ride." Kent grinned.

"That Intelligence major didn't sound happy. We better get back here before he lands," Spud said.

"I'll leave a note for him at the desk," Kent said. He knew they wouldn't get back within the half-hour, but he wasn't very well pleased with the help Intelligence had given him.

Spud got his revolver and flashlight. Kent tucked the Luger

inside his belt. At the desk they left word that they would be back within an hour. The doorman called a cab and Kent directed the driver to go to the street his cab had been on when it was hit. He was sure he would remember that alley. There had been an old wreck of a building to the right of the alley entrance, and a bicycle shop on the left.

"I don't suppose you're going to tell me what we're looking for," Spud said after they were out on the street.

"We're looking for a bottle of after-shave lotion," Kent said, and grinned.

"O.K., wise guy," Spud retorted. "So you need a shave and have to have your private brand of lotion."

They came to the street the cab had been following. Kent ordered the driver to turn right and follow the street, keeping as close to the curb as possible. Tokyo traffic follows the left side of the street so the driver stayed close to the left curb. They moved along at a slower pace now that the driver could not dodge in and out, using all of the street. Kent kept watching for the bicycle shop and the old building. After a time he spotted them and leaned forward.

"Drive into that alley," he ordered.

The driver gave him a questioning look, but honked his horn loudly and shot through the pedestrian traffic on the sidewalk, sending people ducking in every direction.

"Pull up here," Kent ordered when they were well into the alley and close to the spot where the cab had landed.

The driver pulled up and sat watching Kent and Spud as they walked slowly across the alley. Kent had the flashlight beam on the pavement. There were signs of the wreck, but the cab was gone. Kent wondered if the driver was dead when help arrived. He supposed he should call the Tokyo police and

give them a description of Asko and her companions. He had a feeling he'd better do as Intelligence suggested.

They moved along, with Spud keeping a pointed silence. He was miffed because he did not think Kent had told him the truth about what they were looking for. Kent calculated as nearly as he could the spot where he had hit the ground and where he had come up against the rock wall. He played the light along the base of the wall. Its beam caught something that glinted. Kent moved forward. The plastic bottle lay in a hole where a cobblestone had come loose. Spud came up beside him and stood staring down at the bottle.

"After-shave-lotion bottle," he muttered.

Kent picked up the bottle and turned toward their cab. "That's it," he said.

Spud followed him in silence. When they were in the cab he burst forth, "Now don't tell me you came out here for that. You can get the same thing at the hotel for twenty-eight cents."

"I can't buy what's in this bottle," Kent said.

"And what's in it is classified," Spud said sarcastically.

"Right," Kent admitted.

As they came to the cab the driver leaned out. "A car followed us here. It's parked back a few yards from the entrance." There was a worried frown on the driver's face.

"Swell," Spud said eagerly. "Let's go out and take 'em."

"No," Kent answered firmly, then turned to the driver. "A convertible?"

"Dodge. Fifty-seven model." The driver leaned toward Kent. "This I no like."

"Can we go down this alley?" Kent asked.

"Sure. I go by police." The driver nodded his head back and forth. "I go by police fast."

"Why don't we go out and take the rats?" Spud broke in.

"Because one of those rats out there has a machine gun," Kent answered.

"I go see police," the driver said.

"You will take us back to the Sanno Hotel," Kent said firmly. He turned to Spud. "Get out your yen."

Spud produced a sheaf of yen. Ken slipped two one-thousand-yen notes from the sheaf and held them so the driver could see the numbers. "You take us to the Sanno Hotel. You lose that car out there."

The driver looked at the two notes, then glanced out toward the street. Suddenly he grinned broadly.

"I take you Sanno," he said.

Kent and Spud climbed in. The driver started the car with a roar. Spud had his service revolver out. Kent did not bother to get out the Luger. All he wanted was to stay out of range of a machine gun. This was no time for a pitched battle. The car leaped ahead and roared down the narrow alley. Kent glanced back and saw the convertible turning into the alley. The gang had their nerve using the convertible. A lot of people must have seen it and described it to the police. Perhaps it was the only car they had available. At any rate it indicated they were desperate.

"How come they spotted us and followed us?" Spud shouted. He had the window down and was looking back, his revolver ready.

"Simple. I escape and I'm sure to go to the hotel. When I leave, they tail us. They want to know what we're looking for before they take us." Kent looked back. Bright headlights behind made the small cab stand out as clearly as though the sun were overhead, and the lights were bearing down on the taxi.

Suddenly the driver spun his wheel and the cab reeled into a

lane. The convertible had to go on past. Bushes and shrubbery brushed the sides of the taxi. Kent had caught a glimpse of a NO VEHICLE sign as they entered the lane. There was always such a sign, written in English, at the mouth of such lanes. It was put there to keep American GI's and tourists from entering the lane and getting hung up when it narrowed to a footpath.

Ahead the lane had narrowed. The bushes branched out and touched in the center of the narrow passageway. The driver did not slow down. Kent looked back and saw the convertible's headlights. The big car was going to try to follow. He looked ahead and braced himself as the cab hit the overhanging shrubbery. It went zipping through, with leaves flying in every direction. Kent and Spud both started laughing. Kent leaned forward and patted the driver on the back.

"Good work, boy!" he shouted.

The driver glanced back and grinned broadly. "We go to Sanno Hotel," he said.

"I'm betting on it," Spud said.

They burst out into another street and the driver turned left. In a few minutes they were in heavy traffic and the driver was tooting and ducking bicycles, cars, and three-wheeled trucks. This was an arterial boulevard, one that was crowded day and night. They were sure to get to the hotel unless the driver wrecked the cab. His brush with the thugs had filled him with wild recklessness.

Twenty minutes later the cab pulled up at the entrance to their hotel. When they got out, Kent gave the driver the two thousand yen. Spud dug another thousand from his pocket and handed it to the cabby.

The driver bowed and said, "Thank you."

Spud and Kent entered the hotel and stopped at the desk.

The clerk said there was an officer waiting for them in Room 211. They hurried up the stairs, not waiting for the elevator boy who was also serving as doorman. Kent wanted to get a lot of things straightened out. And he wanted to use the chemical from the bottle on the film he had in his pocket.

CHAPTER 11

Action

WHEN they entered Room 211 they found a major waiting for them. He greeted them with a frown as he uncoiled his six feet four inches of lank body from a chair. His slate-gray eyes looked sleepy as he glanced from Kent to Spud.

"Major Andrews?" Kent asked.

"No, I'm Bedford. You Barstow?"

"I'm Barstow," Kent admitted.

The major nodded and sat down again. He acted as though he was weary. Kent decided that Bedford would be no match for the girl Asko and her pals. Spud sat on the bed, leaving the extra chair for Kent.

"First of all, we clear up a few angles," Bedford said. "How come you ditched us after you left the air terminal?" He regarded Kent with a lazy stare.

"I decided to find out if we were being followed," Kent answered.

Bedford grinned. "And you were being followed. By folks who know Tokyo better than our drivers."

Kent nodded. He guessed he had acted foolishly.

"They caught up with you and killed your driver. You are lucky to be here." Bedford spoke without emphasis.

"You're telling me," Kent answered. "I came within an ace of being clobbered."

Bedford nodded. "The colonel is at this moment taking our driver apart a piece at a time." He smiled briefly.

Spud laughed. "The driver will probably wind up doing K.P. over at K-14."

"Is K-14 still there?" Kent asked. He remembered the mud and the tents and the rusting quonset huts of a base near Seoul.

"K-14 is still there," Bedford said. "We've been trying for a year to give it to the Rocs."

"Is it as bad as it was when I flew missions out of it?" Kent asked.

"Worse," Bedford assured him grimly. "Now there's a Commie jet base just fifteen minutes from it. A big one." He crossed his thin legs. "Tell me just what happened this evening."

Kent gave Bedford most of the details. He did not dwell on the film or the reason for returning to the spot. Bedford asked no questions about them. Kent wasn't ready to discuss any of the secret part of his mission. He described the girl Asko and her companions.

"We know the girl as Korea Kate. Her real name is Asko. She dropped out of sight a year ago. We'd like to get our hands on her in a spot where we call the tune." Bedford spread his legs out in front of him and slouched down in his chair.

"Your boys missed a good chance. She flew from Washington to Honolulu aboard a MATS C-97. And she sat in the seat next to me. She's the world's greatest actress." He shook his head. "She planted some sort of gadget on me. It almost killed the attendant who took it back to the washroom to clean some salad dressing from my jacket sleeve."

Bedford smiled. "You were supposed to be inside the jacket when it went to the washroom?"

"Right," Kent answered. "Andy talked me out of it. I'll bet he'll be more careful in the future."

"We'll get a complete report on that later," Bedford said. He shifted his position and stared at Kent. "What were you looking for when you went out tonight with Captain Murphy?"

Kent gave Spud a warning look. "I had an idea I might find some of my stuff. I get tired of scattering my belongings in various parts of the world. This time I lost my money and passport."

Bedford smiled. It was clear that he was not buying that explanation. He reached into his pocket and got out a battered and blackened briar pipe and a pouch of tobacco. As he filled the pipe and lighted it he seemed to be giving Kent's explanation deep thought. He spoke through a blue haze of smoke.

"This whole business has been hashed up. Washington starts with the idea that no one knows you are connected with this mission. But a lot of people have worked on your gadget and there was a leak, probably more than one. An officer from Colonel Jefferys' own office got killed, hit and run." Bedford lowered his pipe.

"That seems clear enough," Kent agreed.

"From now on it's our job to see that you get where you are going. You'll have the help of Captain Murphy at least part of the time. The whole thing is so hush-hush, that is your actual destination, that we do not know where you are going aside from Seoul, which can't be your final destination."

"I think I'll know within an hour," Kent said. "At the moment I do not know myself. But there is some information that should be sent by code to Colonel Jefferys at once. When that gang was sure they were going to clobber me, they talked some." Kent leaned forward. "I wouldn't give the dope to you

here. It will have to be in tighter security. Dozens of civilians have the run of this place. It could be wired."

Bedford nodded. "And you'd like my identification to be a bit better than just knowing your code name?"

"That's right," Kent admitted. The thought hit him. He was being as cautious as Colonel Jefferys. He grinned.

"We'll run out to headquarters." Bedford got to his feet.

"I don't mean to be difficult," Kent said, "but this is a new game for me."

Bedford smiled good-naturedly. He was a career man in Intelligence and he hated anyone who talked too much about anything.

"You got an armed escort?" Spud asked.

"No," Bedford answered.

"There might be a carload of toughs waiting down on the street," Spud said.

"In a Dodge convertible the police are looking for?" Bedford lifted an eyebrow.

Kent had picked up Spud's camera and opened the back. He started rolling up the unexposed frames.

"Hey," Spud protested. "You're ruining that film. I put out a buck seventy-five for it. All I've taken was four pictures."

Kent glanced at the lens of the camera. "You missed those girls on Waikiki Beach. Your lens is set at F-22." He pocketed the roll of film.

There was a flicker of amusement in Bedford's sleepy eyes as he watched Kent remove the film from the camera, but he made no comment. Kent began to wonder if he had played it smart in taking Bedford for granted. The major could be a phony. Anything could happen in this fantastic game. He picked the Luger off the bed and tucked it into his belt before leaving the room.

In the lobby Bedford did not stop at the desk. He headed straight for the wide double doors that led to the driveway. They descended a flight of inside steps and went outside. The doorman smiled at them.

"You want a taxi?" he asked.

Bedford had walked into the driveway and was looking down toward the parking lot below the hotel.

"My staff car is down there but I can't see the driver." He turned to the doorman. "Go down and tell the driver of that green car that I want it brought up."

The doorman hurried down the ramp. Bedford walked to the entrance door. "We may as well wait inside," he said casually.

They waited in the entrance hall until the doorman returned. "No driver down there," he reported. "No driver in parking lot."

Bedford nodded. He turned toward the lobby. "May be a bit of a delay. You fellows sit down and take it easy." The sleepy look was still in Bedford's eyes, but his mouth was pulled into a thin line.

Spud and Kent seated themselves in comfortable chairs in the lobby. Bedford went to a wall phone and put through a call. He talked for a minute or so. His voice did not carry to where the boys sat. After he had hung up he walked over and sat down beside the boys. He looked at Kent with more interest than he had shown before.

"They really want you, Barstow," he said.

Kent decided that Bedford really was with AFCIN. He wondered what the next move would be, but he did not ask. Spud kept his mouth shut for once. Bedford got out his pipe, filled it, and lighted it. When it was going good, he turned to Kent.

"Having a murder rap on Korea Kate and her men will help a lot. The Japanese police want to know who killed that taxi driver."

"I can identify five of them," Kent said.

"Yes, but we can't afford to have you held here as a witness," Bedford said thoughtfully. "We'll give them descriptions but not a witness. Later possibly."

An airman entered the lobby. He crossed the floor at an unsteady walk. He was hatless, and he was plainly fighting mad. Bedford jumped to his feet. It was the first time he had shown any haste.

"What happened to you, Frank?" he asked as the airman halted before him.

"Some goon sapped me and dragged me around to a warehouse on the street. Tied me up but didn't do much of a job of it. Must have been in a big hurry." Frank rubbed the back of his head gingerly.

At that moment two men in civilian clothes entered the lobby and walked directly to where Bedford and the others were standing. The two men glanced at Kent and Spud, then one of them spoke to Bedford.

"Three of them. We're turning them in for attempted car theft."

Bedford nodded. Kent wanted to ask what the men looked like. He wondered if they had grabbed Kim. But Bedford was all action now. "Sternes and Pelky, meet Murphy and Barstow. We're headed for my office. Trail along."

Sternes and Pelky smiled at Kent. "So he's the one," Pelky said.

"Right," Bedford answered. He turned to Frank. "Feel up to driving?"

"Yes, sir, but I'd like to see if I can find my cap. It's new issue."

"Go ahead. We'll go down and wait for you in the car."

The plain-clothes men had left their car on the street. They headed down the driveway. Bedford led the way to the staff car. They all got into the car and presently Frank returned carrying his cap. He got in behind the wheel and laid the cap on the seat beside him.

"Can't wear it," he explained. "The knot on my head's too touchy."

"After you drop us off, report to infirmary," Bedford said.

Frank started to protest, then said meekly, "Yes, sir."

The streets were empty except for a few scurrying cabs. Frank drove fast, and they arrived at headquarters in a short time.

Bedford's office was small. It was reached after passing through two other offices filled with desks. Kent was impressed by the size of the operation. AFCIN was certainly an outfit that handled a lot of work.

There was a door at the far side of the office. It was open and revealed a larger office. Kent had a feeling of security in such surroundings. This office was like a hundred others he had been in. It was like the offices on every base.

"Find yourselves chairs," Bedford said. "The colonel will be here in a few minutes. I got him out of a warm bed."

Kent did not sit down. "I'd like to have a cup and a room where I can be alone for a few minutes."

Bedford smiled as he got to his feet. He went into an outer office and returned with a clean coffee cup. "This do?" he asked.

"Fine." Kent took the cup.

Bedford nodded toward the open door across the room. "Use the colonel's office."

Kent went into the colonel's office and closed the door. He set the cup on the corner of a big desk and got out the two rolls of film and the plastic bottle. When he poured out the liquid it smelled fragrant. He next stripped the protecting paper from the 120 roll of film. He swung the film up and down through the liquid. The yellow gelatin surface rapidly cleared and Kent could see writing on the clear surface. He found a paper clip on the desk and used it to fasten one end of the film to the edge of a floor lampshade. Then he straightened out the film. When the floor lamp was switched on, he could read the message.

Kent was disappointed. This wasn't a standard briefing. But it did tell him something. It began: MEMORIZE THEN BURN. The rest of the message read:

MEET CAPTAIN GRAFTON AND SERGEANT BASS AT A
DESIGNATED PLACE IN SEOUL. COMPLETE MISSION
PLANS WILL BE GIVEN YOU BY WORD OF MOUTH.
PROCEED TO SEOUL CIVILIAN CLOTHES, COMMERCIAL
FLIGHT. CONTACT AT INTERNATIONAL HOTEL MR. H.
K. MATNEY. CODE IS RED EAGLE THREE.

Kent stared at the message. He would be very happy to see Charlie Grafton and Benny Bass. He had left them at the base in the Mojave Desert. Charlie was the youthful wizard who had masterminded the monster. Benny Bass had been his crew chief.

But the whole plan seemed wrong to Kent, and dangerous. It would have been a simple and safe procedure if he had managed to reach the Far East unidentified and unsuspected. Now a lot of people knew him and were watching for him. He went

over the message again, then picked up a book of matches from the desk. When he applied the flame to the damp film it snapped and sputtered but it burned. Kent held it over an ash tray and watched it vanish in thin white ash.

Kent treated Spud's film and found the message on it identical. He was in the act of burning the second film when a voice behind him said, "In the perfect tradition."

Kent turned around and found himself facing a colonel who was tall and gray-haired. There was a twinkle in the colonel's blue eyes; he stepped over to the desk and extended his hand.

"Black Rose," the colonel said. "No, it's now Red Eagle Three." He smiled. "You are Lieutenant Barstow. I am Colonel Miller."

"I'm certainly glad to meet you, sir," Kent said.

"Sit down, Barstow. Let's talk." The colonel nodded toward a chair beside his desk. He walked around and seated himself.

Kent seated himself and waited. Colonel Miller regarded him searchingly. Kent realized that the blue eyes could be very cold and commanding. But when the colonel smiled the eyes twinkled.

"You come highly recommended."

"Thank you, sir."

"You are now in Intelligence?" When Kent nodded the colonel opened a desk drawer and got out a box of cigars. He opened the box and pushed it toward Kent. Kent shook his head.

"Never smoke, sir," he said.

The colonel selected a cigar for himself. "Not many people have any idea what goes on in AFCIN. Some of it is better than fiction."

"I agree with you, sir," Kent said.

"We have our good days and our bad ones. The last few

days have been bad ones. We win a round and we lose a round." The colonel lighted his cigar. "This is one mission we can't afford to lose out on."

"So I understand, sir," Kent said.

"You don't have to be so formal. Around this office I'm Miller."

Kent restrained a smile. He had an idea there were times when Colonel Miller was addressed very carefully as sir.

"You told Bedford that you had some important information for Colonel Jefferys. You had better tell me what it is."

Something in the colonel's manner convinced Kent that he had better tell Miller everything. It would take a long time to contact Jefferys personally. He told Miller what he had learned from the girl Asko. When he had finished, Miller nodded grimly.

"You have learned something that will go far beyond Jefferys' office. Within an hour quite a few men will be busy at the Pentagon." He stared thoughtfully at the ash on his cigar. "Time seems to be the vital factor. The desperate attempts on your life, the long chances they are taking, everything points to an imminent deadline. I'd better get in contact with Jefferys at once."

"What about a ship with equipment installed?" Kent asked.

"Grafton will have your ship ready for you. Your code message is not of the greatest importance now. Plans have already been changed. They will expect us to fly you out with a strong security guard. We will do just that, but we will fly you to Itazuke. We have the Eighth Fighter Bomber Wing there. At Itazuke things will be tricky. But our plan is sound."

Itazuke, the air crossroads of the Far East. It had been a long time since Kent had visited Itazuke. "Been a long time since I was there," he said.

"Yours will be a short visit. We won't have time to change the setup at Seoul, but if we can trick them at Itazuke you should have no trouble there." The colonel held out his hand. "Good luck, Barstow."

Kent went into Bedford's office. Spud was alone there and he was very unhappy. "Everybody left. There's a staff car waiting for us outside. I understand we get an escort, too."

"Good. Let's go."

"I'm sure an orphan," Spud mourned. "Nobody tells me anything."

"They've put a padlock on me for sure," Kent said. "I'd give you the lowdown if I could."

Spud didn't argue. He knew what Kent was up against. They walked down the stairs and out into the night.

CHAPTER 12

On the Way

SPUD was in a tough mood when they reached the hotel. Kent expected an outburst from him, and was all set to get it over with so that he could get to bed. The combination elevator boy and doorman was off on an errand so they climbed the stairs.

"Me for the sack," Kent said as they turned down the hallway.

Spud scowled. "*I'm* not sleepy. I'm fed up. Tough characters trying to knock you off and all I do is stand around with my teeth in my mouth."

"We had some fun tonight," Kent said with a grin. "And wait until you see this girl Asko, pal."

Spud shrugged his shoulders but he did smile as he remembered the taxi ride to the hotel. "Here we are in Tokyo. We got all night. What are we going to do?"

"Go to bed," Kent answered. He glanced at his key. His room was 215. That put him in a combination suite where he shared a bathroom with Spud. "Tokyo clubs close at twelve, remember?"

"Yeah," Spud answered. "We've wasted the night."

A maid passed them and Kent started. She was small and pretty; she looked a lot like Asko. She smiled at them as she hurried past. Spud grinned back at her. Kent took a deep

breath. He was so beat he was seeing double. Spud opened the door leading to the hall joining the three rooms. Spud's room was to the right, Kent's to the left. There was a room between them, and its door was open. The hall light shone into the room. Kent could see a pair of service shoes and service trousers. There was a man in the room and he had his feet elevated to the top of a dresser. The boys could see only his feet.

"We got company," Spud said.

Kent moved forward and looked into the room. Their neighbor was a stocky young man. He sat in his shirt sleeves and he was wearing a shoulder holster. The butt of a service revolver showed under his armpit.

"Hello," Kent said.

Back of him Spud muttered, "Watchdog."

"Morning, sir," the man said as he lowered his feet to the floor. The stripes on his shirt sleeves showed he was a tech sergeant.

"Dont get up," Kent said quickly. "We're headed for the sack."

He turned toward the door of 215. Spud was in no mood to sleep. "I'll just sit and chin awhile with you, Sergeant," he said.

Kent entered his room and closed the door. Intelligence was on the job. The sergeant would insure a good night's sleep. He undressed and piled into bed. Before he closed his eyes it occurred to him that he didn't know when he was leaving. That was up to Colonel Miller and his men, but he had better get to sleep at once. He was likely to be called at an early hour.

When Kent opened his eyes again he was sure he hadn't been asleep more than a few minutes. He blinked and groaned, then he looked up into Spud's face.

"Up and at 'em," Spud said cheerfully.

"Didn't you go to bed?" Kent asked.

"Nope. Bedford showed up and finally briefed me. I've been busy." Spud sprawled in a chair with a smug expression on his face. Kent didn't ask any questions, though he knew that was what Spud wanted. He headed for the shower.

After he had dressed they went down to the field mess for breakfast. Coffee and hotcakes brought Kent's spirits up to Spud's level. Spud still hadn't offered any information. They had talked about Tokyo while eating.

When they returned to the lobby, Kent found a new flight bag waiting for him. It looked well stocked. Spud had probably handled that part.

"Civvies and such like," Spud explained.

A squad car arrived before Spud could explain further. They went out to get into the car, with the doorman bringing their bags. There were two Japanese in the garden puttering around and another pair down at the entrance.

"Wonder which one is an agent?" Spud asked with a wide grin.

"One of them, for sure. Bedford said they were to know I was leaving and where I was going." Kent looked at the men in the garden as the car moved away from the hotel entrance. Neither of the gardeners seemed to be paying any attention to the squad car, nor did the two at the gate as the car passed them.

As they turned into the street, another AF car pulled away from the curb and dropped in behind them. It stayed several cars back but it was clearly an escort.

Children crowded the sidewalks on their way to school. The girls all wore similar blouses, the boys wore uniforms. Cabs darted in and out, three-wheeled trucks lumbered past, and

there were many private cars. They passed the closed doors of the Benabasha Club. Spud sighed.

"Imagine being two blocks from a swell floor show and missing it."

Kent laughed. "It will be there when we come back."

At Tokyo International they were checked in efficiently and quickly. It appeared that all arrangements had been made in advance. Colonel Miller appeared as they were moving toward the flight gate. He shook hands with Kent and slapped Spud on the back.

"Have a good time at Itazuke. Look up General Deeds and say hello for me," he said jovially.

Kent guessed the colonel was putting on a show. He wondered who the observers were. The place was crowded with every sort of national anyone could imagine. Most were Oriental but many were American military men. It was an ideal spot for an undercover agent.

Their plane was a counterpart of the Douglas DC-4's used by American commercial lines. The resemblance to a commercial flight ended at the gate. Only five other passengers boarded the plane. They were Air Force officers. The highest rank was captain. Spud looked around as they entered the plane.

"Class," he said, and grinned. "At last someone in the AF has realized our importance."

There was a table with facing seats, and forward there was a bunk room. The seats were deep and comfortable. This was a VIP aircraft. Kent settled himself next to a window. The attendant took his bag forward and stored it in a coatroom. The five officers had seated themselves well back.

Just before the ramp was rolled away Major Bedford came aboard. He took a seat directly behind Kent and Spud. After

the engines were revved up, the effort to talk was so great that the boys did not try.

The hop to Itazuke was a short one compared to the usual expanses of water between Pacific bases. In less than five hours the ship came in over the island and headed down a long runway. Kent looked out upon a scene that had once been very familiar to him. Itazuke was the first Far East home of the F-100 jet fighter. Both he and Spud had served a tour of duty there on the F-100's.

Spud loosened his seat belt. He cocked his head on one side and regarded Kent quizzically. "You know, boy, you may turn out so good at this foreign trouble-shooting that they'll keep you on it."

"I'm too dumb to outwit foreign crooks," Kent answered cheerfully. "Anyway, I'm up for promotion, and if I make another shift that will be off."

"They picked you for this job for more than just your jet jockey ability," Spud said shrewdly.

"Same reason they make cooks out of stenographers and vice versa." He knew Spud was fishing for information. He suspected Kent had been testing more than the F-102A down on the Mojave Desert.

Bedford had spent the whole trip reading a paper-back novel. He turned down a corner of a page and closed the book. Shoving it into a hip pocket, he got to his feet and faced the boys who were already in the aisle.

"There'll be a VIP car waiting for us," he said, and smiled broadly.

The ramp locked into place and the passengers stepped out into hot sunshine. The five officers were met by a bus. Bedford waited impatiently while the bags were unloaded. He picked up

his bag and nodded toward a parked sedan. Kent and Spud got their bags and followed.

Kent grinned cheerfully. This was more like it, open and aboveboard, no secrecy, no foolishness, just plain Air Force technique. But the sleepy-eyed Bedford had not been talkative during the trip. Kent knew nothing about what was expected of him.

They drove to Base Operations where Bedford checked briefly with two captains and a security officer. The two captains got into the car. Bedford introduced them as Walker and Dodge.

Kent assumed that Walker and Dodge were Intelligence men. Hundreds like them were stationed all over the world. They looked lean and hard and competent. They had probably held many jobs but never as admitted members of AFCIN.

They left Base Operations at a fast pace. Six miles away Kent could see Fukuoka drowsing in the hot sunshine. After entering the base they passed a bank with a post-office building across the street from it, then the base gymnasium, and BX and the base theater. The car pulled up before the BOQ.

Barracks street looked very much like any street at home. There were Fords and Chevrolets and Plymouths parked along the curb, with a number of higher-priced models sprinkled in. Three native men were clipping a hedge. They could have been either Japanese or Chinese, as are most of the people living on the string of islands south of Japan proper. They paid no attention to the officers who got out of the VIP sedan and entered the Bachelor Officers' Quarters.

At the desk Bedford got keys and they went down a hall. Three rooms had been reserved, one for Kent, one for Spud, and one for Bedford. Kent's room was large and air-conditioned. It was one of those reserved for visiting VIP's and

was well furnished, with a lounge and two bedrooms. Kent wondered why Spud hadn't been put up in the extra bedroom.

They all sat down and waited for Bedford to brief them. The major got a cigar going before he turned to Kent.

"You and Murphy split up here. Murphy and Walker will report to the flight line. We had a little trouble finding a man who looked somewhat like you and could pass for you under casual inspection." He glanced briefly at Captain Walker.

Kent took a closer look at the captain. They were the same height and build and the facial features were similar. He grinned at Walker. Being his stand-in might turn out a bit rugged. The major went on talking.

"Security is tight here. No one will get a very good look at Walker. We have to hire a lot of native help and it is hard to screen. It is safe to assume that the Commies know we have recently brought in several F-102A's. The group we have to deal with has a very good network, better, I'd say, than the agents of the government we have to deal with."

Kent relaxed and listened. Bedford was getting near to the main points he was interested in. The major pulled an ash tray toward him and knocked the ash from his cigar.

"Barstow will change into civilian clothes and wait here." The major paused. There was a knock at the door. "Come." Bedford got to his feet.

The door opened and a captain and a sergeant entered.

"Captain Cook and Sergeant Pruitt," Bedford said briefly. "Cook will go with us. That will make the same number of officers leaving as came in. Sergeant Pruitt will stay and see Barstow safely on his way." The major faced Kent. "You know what to do when you reach your objective?"

Kent nodded. He knew what to do when he reached Seoul.

"When we get outside we'll mill around as we get into the

car. But make it fast." Bedford sized up his crew for a few moments, then turned toward the door.

The five officers left the room. Kent looked at Sergeant Pruitt. He was a clean-cut man well past forty, a career man, probably rated more valuable than many an officer. His stripes showed that he was a warrant officer, W-4. Pruitt would receive approximately the same pay as a major. Kent smiled at the sergeant as this thought passed through his mind. He had a long way to go before he was as well paid as Pruitt.

"While you change, sir, I'll lay out Captain Murphy's things in his room." Sergeant Pruitt had a pleasant voice but there was more than a hint of authority in it. Kent guessed he had served more than one hitch as a top kick for a squadron.

The sergeant left, and Kent explored his wardrobe. He found white shirts, slacks, and a light gray tropical suit of dacron and cotton. There was a pair of civilian oxfords. Kent smiled as he held up several neckties which were certainly not regulation. Bedford had overlooked nothing. There wasn't a single item that would connect him with the military. There was a straw hat in a special box. Kent laughed. He hadn't worn a straw hat since he was a kid.

He was knotting a blue tie decorated with scottie dogs when Sergeant Pruitt entered. The sergeant looked him over and nodded approvingly. He started putting Kent's discarded uniform on a hanger.

"Those go to Murphy's room," Kent said.

Sergeant Pruitt said, "Yes, sir." He gathered up Spud's things and left with them. When he returned, Kent was regarding himself in one of the big mirrors over a dresser. He had put on the gray suit and was trying to get the straw hat fixed so that it felt comfortable. He laughed, and the sergeant joined in.

"I feel like a sap," Kent said.

"You look sharp, sir." Pruitt set a brief case on the floor. "As a traveling businessman you'll need this."

"I suppose so. What line of business would you suggest, Pruitt?"

"American automobiles. The case is well stocked with literature of the Chrysler Corporation, also order forms and report forms. You will find that the Dodge is a very popular car on the islands." Pruitt started closing Kent's flying bag. "I will take care of your bag. On arrival you will find you have a rather scuffed leather suitcase in place of this flight bag."

Intelligence had taken over with the thoroughness that had made them a valuable organization and a dangerous opponent to an enemy.

"We will leave by a back entrance. There will be a delivery van at the back door. You are to ride in the back. I will check the back yard so that you are not seen, and I will drive the van." Pruitt paused to see if Kent had any questions to ask.

Kent picked up the brief case. "Let's go," he said, and started for the door.

Pruitt led the way down the hall to a back stairs. He motioned for Kent to wait inside when they had reached the back door. Kent looked out and saw an Air Force van with one door open. It was backed up to a loading platform. It was a large van and looked exactly like a hundred others that would most certainly be on the base hauling supplies. Pruitt pulled a fatigue cap from his pocket and put it on. He beckoned to Kent.

Kent moved quickly through the door and got into the back of the van where he found a canvas stool waiting. Pruitt closed the door and latched it on the outside. Kent sat down and looked around. Up forward a stack of cartons reached to

the roof so that he could not see Pruitt when the sergeant climbed into the cab. The engine started and they were off. Kent judged from the time it took on the road that they were headed for the flight line. The van stopped twice but was never opened for inspection. Pruitt had identification that cleared him without question.

The van finally came to a halt and the back door opened. Kent could see a landing platform with boxes and crates on it. Pruitt was standing outside the door smiling at him.

"This way," he said.

Kent picked up his brief case and got out of the van. He followed the sergeant across the platform. Glancing back toward the flight line, he had a glimpse of the tall tail of a TWA Mainliner, then he was inside the warehouse.

There was no one in the big building. They crossed to a door that opened on a long hallway. A few minutes later they passed through another doorway and Kent found himself inside the terminal BX. The little store was very familiar to Kent. He had been in it many times.

Pruitt had tucked his fatigue cap into a pocket and was wearing a cloth cap. He stopped at a rack of postcards and stood looking at them. Kent halted before another rack and selected a few cards at random. Pruitt was over at the writing counter addressing a card. Kent walked over.

Pruitt ignored him but, when Kent started writing, he spoke, "Pick up your reservation at the TWA desk. Murray Bernard, 127 New Montgomery Street, San Francisco. You are on your own. Good luck, sir." Pruitt picked up the two cards he had addressed and crossed to a stamp-vending machine.

Kent addressed a card to his mother and one to his younger brother. After Pruitt had left the stamp machine, Kent got coins from the girl at the cash register to buy stamps. He took

his time stamping the cards and dropping them into the mail slot. There were a few customers in the store. They all appeared to be business people looking for reading matter. Taking a firm grip on his brief case, Kent sauntered out into the waiting room, trying his best to look like a prosperous salesman from San Francisco.

CHAPTER 13

Pursuit in the Streets

EVERY seat in the Mainliner was occupied, but Kent was the only Western businessman traveling to Seoul. He was surprised that so many people had business there or wanted to go there. He was aware that the flight had not originated at Fukuoka, but even so he was impressed. This was high-fare travel, and the passengers all looked prosperous. He watched those he could see and wondered what their occupations were. None looked sinister, but he already knew from experience that foreign agents seldom looked dangerous.

The flight took a little more than four hours. Now that he was getting closer to the work he was to do, Kent was filled with a restless eagerness. He was impatient to meet Charlie and Benny so that he could learn the actual details.

The Mainliner landed at the Seoul Air Terminal on schedule. Kent forced himself to sit calmly in his seat while the other passengers crowded into the aisle with their bags and parcels. These people had more carry-on baggage than would have been allowed in the States. They did not appear to trust a baggage check. The man who had sat beside Kent, a squat Chinese, elbowed his way ahead of a woman and her small daughter. He had ignored Kent during the flight, and he had

failed to excuse himself as he shoved Kent's brief case aside when leaving his seat.

When the aisle was fairly clear, Kent got to his feet. He put on the straw hat and tried not to feel self-conscious as he carried his brief case toward the unloading ramp. A slant-eyed little girl in a perky hostess cap smiled at him.

Kent returned the smile. "Pleasant trip," he said.

"Thank you, sir." For a fleeting moment Kent found himself comparing this little oriental girl with Asko. About the same size, with the same innocent smile Asko had given him the first time he had met her.

In the terminal he had to line up and wait for his bag. Finally he handed over his baggage tag. The harried Oriental back of the low counter said, "You point it out?"

"It's a scuffed brown suitcase," Kent answered.

The little man shrugged his shoulders. There were dozens of scuffed brown suitcases lined up back of the counter. He looked at the tag, then started down the line of bags. He located Kent's bag and thumped it down on the counter. Kent eased the man's feelings with a generous tip. The bag was scuffed and it was brown. He eased it off the counter and headed for the customs desk.

As he walked toward the street entrance after clearing customs, Kent tried not to inspect openly the people around him. But at the exit doors he halted and pretended to be adjusting his bags. He set the suitcase down and glanced around him. There were quite a few men standing around, but mostly the people were hurrying on their way. A dark-faced man sat on a bench reading a newspaper, but he did not glance in Kent's direction. Kent picked up the suitcase and walked out on the sidewalk to look for a cab.

There were three rather battered-looking cabs at the curb.

One had been assembled by adding an old car body to the chassis of a jeep. Kent realized that he was now in an area that had only recently begun to recover from the ravages of war. Many of the wounds had not healed. He walked to the soundest-looking of the three cabs. The driver opened the door and as he did so a ragged urchin dashed forward, shoving three other boys aside, and tugged at Kent's suitcase. Kent grinned at the boy as he allowed him to put the bag into the cab. He avoided a second urchin and carried the brief case into the cab himself. But he gave a coin to each boy.

"International Hotel," he said to the driver who slammed the door shut and roughly shoved one urchin off the running board of the cab.

The cab moved into a stream of traffic. Kent looked out through the window. Seoul had not been so successful as Tokyo in recovering from the devastation of war. There was evidence on every hand that the city had been fought over and bombed. The streets were rough and pitted. Primitive shops and buildings huddled between newer structures and older ones that had been repaired. But the streets were crowded with people. The homeless boys were still there as he had seen them during the war days. They must be a new crop but they looked the same, with their ragged clothing and pinched, hungry faces. He recalled that they were called "slick-boys" and were experts at stealing anything that wasn't closely watched. They were also adept at dodging the police.

Here on the streets of Seoul it would be easy for a foreign agent to operate. The demilitarized zone was only a few miles away. North Koreans and others could easily enter and mix with the local people.

The cab pulled up at the entrance to the International Hotel. Two boys in uniform ran out to meet the cab. They shouted

angrily at the street boys who tried to get there first. Kent let them take his bags while he paid the driver. Before he entered the hotel lobby he looked up and down the street. No car had followed the cab so far as he could tell. He entered and walked to the desk. A sallow-faced young man gave him a brief smile and looked at him out of black, unblinking eyes.

"You have a reservation for Murray Bernard?" Kent asked.

"Yes, Mr. Bernard. We have given you Room 507. A boy will take your bags up. Please register." The youth pushed a card toward Kent. Then he turned and removed an envelope from a pigeonhole along with a key. He tapped a bell after passing the envelope across the desk to Kent.

Kent signed the register and added the San Francisco address on New Montgomery Street.

A bellboy came forward with Kent's bags. He took the key and started toward the elevator. Kent followed him. The elevator was old and protested loudly as they slowly rose to the fifth floor. There was a musty smell in the hall and in the room they entered. It was neat enough, but the furniture was worn and there was a rundown atmosphere to the place. The boy opened a window and did the usual things a bellboy always does in hope of getting a good tip. Kent tipped the boy as he imagined a prosperous salesman would tip. The boy smiled gratefully and scurried away. Kent closed and locked the door.

Seating himself in the room's lone chair, Kent opened the envelope the clerk had handed him. The message inside was written on the stationery of a local Dodge-Plymouth dealer. The message was typed. It was a business note asking Mr. Bernard to call at his earliest convenience. He was to ask for Willie Jong, sales manager.

There was no phone in the room. Kent opened his bags and

hung up his shirts and slacks. He laid out his toilet kit and put his shaving gear in the little washroom. Then he went out into the hall looking for a telephone. He found one close to the elevator and dialed the number on the sheet of stationery. Presently a voice in Korean answered.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Willie Jong. This is Mr. Bernard speaking," Kent said in English.

"I will call Mr. Jong." There was a click at the other end of the line.

After a short wait Kent was startled to hear Charlie Grafton's voice. "This is Willie Jong. Glad you have arrived, Mr. Bernard. Have a pleasant trip?"

"Very," Kent answered. He wanted to shout, "How are you, pal?" but he kept his voice impersonal.

"We have orders for several cars. Could I see you at once?"

"Certainly, Mr. Jong," Kent answered.

"You are staying at the International Hotel?"

"Yes, Room 507, and I have an order book waiting." Kent chuckled.

"Could you meet me at the Purple Tearoom in an hour? Any cab can take you there. It is convenient to our place of business." Kent smiled at Charlie's effort to give his voice a foreign accent. He must have worked hard on it.

"I'll meet you at the Purple Tearoom. We have a good selection of cars warehoused at Yokohama."

"Good. We will do business."

Kent hung up the phone and went back to his room. The going must be rugged to force Charlie to use so roundabout a way of contacting him. And what was Charlie doing in Seoul? He should be out on a base taking care of the monster. He sat by the window thinking about the various angles. Perhaps Charlie was one man who would not be known to the

enemy agents. There was a tap at his door. Kent got up and opened it enough to look into the hall. He kept one foot against it to jam it if necessary. Charlie Grafton and Benny Bass stood outside.

"Open up fast," Charlie said.

Kent stepped back and the two men pushed into the room. Charlie closed and locked the door before facing Kent.

"Good to see you, Kent," he said.

Charlie was small and wore thick-lensed glasses that gave him an owl-like expression. Benny was chiefly distinguished by big ears and a baby face that deceived most people who met him. Benny was a natural-born mechanic with an uncanny knack for solving any and all ailments suffered by any sort of machine. He grinned broadly at Kent.

"Have fun on the way out?" he asked.

"Never a dull moment," Kent assured his flight chief.

Charlie sat down on the bed. He regarded Kent seriously. "Glad you're here. We're getting out of this hotel fast."

"Someone suspicious?" Kent asked.

"Everything was fine until this morning. All of a sudden we're being watched and followed. Now that you've arrived they may close in fast." Charlie got to his feet and walked to the window.

"I thought I had thrown them off the track. Intelligence went to a lot of trouble," Kent said thoughtfully.

"I'll bet by now they know you aren't in Itazuke," Charlie said grimly. "Someone here in Korea recognized Benny and me, that's sure. So they're taking a good look."

"How come they sent you and Benny to meet me?" Kent asked.

"Everything had worked so smoothly. Headquarters was sure Benny and I were clear. We were the only ones they felt

sure of." Charlie stared down into the street below the window.

"How about yelling for help?" Kent asked.

"No time for that. We simply run for it." Charlie turned away from the window. "I have a feeling that by using my friend, Willie Jong, we may have bought ourselves a couple of hours. They are probably set to trail you. I am sure they know you are going to the Purple Tearoom within a half-hour or so. They have at least two men downstairs in the lobby and a couple more out on the street. We pretended not to notice them as we came in."

"There's not much security over here, just local police," Benny said with a grin. "The Rocs do their best but the place is loaded with Commie agents and spies."

"Here is the way we have it planned," Charlie explained. "We take nothing with us. If they are checking the rooms every time we leave, that may throw them off for a while. Benny and I go down the back fire-escape ladder. I don't think the back alley is being watched. They think they have us fooled."

Kent grinned. "I go out the front way with my brief case headed for the Purple Tearoom?"

"That's right. You'll drive down a wide street with plenty of traffic on it. You will have given us time to get out of here to our car and get parked on that street. Stop your cab and join us. Then we're off to rendezvous point."

"Sounds smooth," Kent said.

"If we don't show, you go on to the Purple Tearoom. Willie Jong will be there. Give him the code name. He will do his best for you. It may get rough if you have to go there. I'm sure that that tearoom is covered."

"Sounds like the wheels were moving," Kent said grimly.

"Right. We'll be on our way. See you in fifteen or twenty minutes." Charlie and Benny walked to the door. Benny

opened the door and looked up and down the hall. They left, closing the door softly behind them.

Kent picked up the straw hat and put it on. He opened the closet and took out the brief case. He grinned briefly at the clothes hanging there. He seemed to be getting into the habit of losing his wardrobe. He sat down and waited for fifteen minutes, then picked up the brief case and left the room. It took the elevator a long time to get to his floor and a long time to creak back down to the lobby. At the desk he left his key and asked for a cab.

One of the doormen went out and flagged down a cab. Kent got into it. "Purple Tearoom," he said to the driver.

As he sank back against the cushions he wondered which of the men in the lobby had been the agents. There had been a number of men sitting around. He decided that he lacked proper training as an Intelligence man. None of the men in the lobby had looked very suspicious.

The cab rattled down a rutted street. It turned left at the first intersection into a wider street with heavier traffic. People thronged the sidewalks, hurrying along or just loitering. It seemed an unlikely place for violence. Kent kept watch on his left for a car with Charlie and Benny in it. He was sure it would not be a military car.

The cab jolted along, ducking around the slower cars and trucks. Kent spotted a gray sedan parked at the curb. He leaned forward to see who was in the front seat. His driver swerved right and darted around a van, putting them well into the right lanes of traffic. Kent looked back. Charlie and Benny were in the gray sedan. Benny was at the wheel.

"Pull over to the curb and let me out," Kent ordered sharply.

The driver gave him a quick backward look and kept on going.

"Pull over!" Kent's voice was hard and clipped.

The driver swerved, missed a man on a bicycle, and swerved back. He worked his way to the curb without undue haste. Kent jerked open the door. He tossed a bill, which amounted to four times the fare, into the driver's lap. Gripping his brief case, he started back through the heavy pedestrian traffic.

Kent dodged women with bundles on their heads and people who were strolling along in groups. He came to an intersection where the crowd was very dense. Up ahead he could see the gray sedan. While he was shoving through the crowd he felt a jerk at his brief case. The handle slipped from his fingers. He twisted around in time to see his case disappear between two fat women, and he caught a glimpse of a shock of black hair.

He made a split-second decision. No use in wasting time chasing the slick-boy. He couldn't afford to cause a commotion. He shoved forward, and when he was clear of the crowd he started laughing. The slick-boy would be disappointed when he opened the bag and found only a bale of booklets advertising cars. But the brief case was a good one. He could sell it to the black market. Kent started to run. He reached the sedan and ducked into the door Charlie held open for him.

"Where's your brief case?" Charlie asked.

"Snatched."

Charlie laughed. "The beggars are bold as brass." He turned to Benny. "Get us lost fast, Sergeant."

Benny, like most expert mechanics, drove a car as though he were in a road race. He liked the late-model Ford, plenty of power. But even a dirt-track champion would have had trouble with the Seoul streets. There were detours, and stretches where the pavement had completely vanished. The car lurched and

rocked, but Benny kept it going at a fast pace. Charlie leaned back.

"Guess we gave them the slip," he said.

Kent had been looking back, watching the traffic. He had spotted a big black sedan that was traveling fast.

"I doubt it. Looks like we have a big bus trailing us," he said.

Charlie squirmed around and took a long look. "Sure enough," he agreed. He leaned toward Benny. "Black sedan, probably a Cadillac, trying to close in."

Benny grinned and hunched forward. The Ford leaped ahead, skidded around a city bus, and headed toward a tree-lined lane. The traffic was thinning but the surface of the street had not improved. Benny had the Cadillac spotted in his rear-view mirror. It was heavier and held to the rutted road better than the Ford. It was slowly gaining on them.

They left the lane and headed out on a grade that ran along the top of a dirt dike. On their left the embankment dropped away steeply. Thatched huts, yards, and tiny fields crowded up close to the foot of the embankment. On the right the swollen waters of a wide river spread below them. It was at flood stage and had covered farms and homes along its banks.

But the road along the top of the dike was smooth. United States engineers from the Army had surfaced it. Kent had a feeling this would be no advantage. The pursuing Cadillac was probably faster than the Ford. He leaned forward and looked at the speedometer. Benny had nursed the Ford up to just under a hundred miles per hour. It was a hazardous pace for a light car.

And another hazard faced them. Dozens of men and women and children lined the roadside. They seemed to have taken refuge there to escape the flood waters. Kent had never seen

so many small children. Twice Benny swerved to avoid hitting an unwary youngster. He bore down on his horn but that did not help much. Kent leaned forward and shouted to Charlie.

"How much farther?"

"Ten miles!" Charlie shouted back.

The black Cadillac was so close now that Kent could see the men in the front seat. One of the men had a machine gun poked out through an open window. The man was easing his head and shoulders over the doorframe and pushing the gun around so as to bring it to bear on the Ford. A few bursts from that gun would seal the fate of the Ford and those in it. He looked ahead, hoping to see a car from the base, and caught his breath sharply.

Two Koreans were walking down the road leading a couple of bullocks. They were a quarter of a mile ahead but Benny was bearing down on them fast. They did not seem to hear the horn or else they chose to ignore it.

At that moment the machine gun in the Cadillac started chattering. Kent tensed himself for the impact of the slugs, but he kept his eyes on the pair of bullocks ahead on the road. Benny hadn't slowed the car at all. He was going to try to drive between the animals. Kent figured that Benny would have only inches to spare if he did miss them. The Ford hurtled down on the bullocks and the fat rumps of the animals seemed to rush to meet it. Kent ducked and braced himself. As he sank down, the glass in the rear window of the Ford shattered, showering fragments over him. He hugged the side of the seat and looked back. The Cadillac was on them and the man with the gun was leaning far out, trying to balance the heavy weapon.

Kent saw one of the bullocks lunge aside as they flashed past his window. It plunged to the pavement behind the Ford

and skidded into a kicking heap in the path of the Cadillac. The bumper of the black car hit the prostrate bullock and lifted it high into the air. The Cadillac twisted like a giant fish with a harpoon sunk into its vitals, then leaped clear of the pavement. Its front wheels hung in the air over the edge of the embankment for a split second, then it plunged down toward the muddy river below.

Kent leaned forward and pounded Benny on the back. "You can slow down now!" he shouted.

Benny let the Ford coast to seventy. He twisted his head around. "Where did that Caddy go?" he demanded.

"Into the river. They shot one of the bullocks and it fell in front of their car."

Benny glanced back. "Sure enough," he said cheerfully. "Now we owe a Roc for a dead bull."

Charlie had recovered enough to sputter, "They wrecked a window."

"We can be thankful for old ammunition and American safety glass," Kent answered.

They moved on and met a small convoy of Air Force trucks. Ahead Kent could see a gate and a sentry box. As they drew nearer, he read the sign over the gate: "G-47. Restricted Area."

There were plenty of Air Force police at the gate and they were all armed. Benny eased the Ford to a stop beside the sentry box. He grinned at the tall sergeant who stepped toward them.

"Well, buddy, we got here," he greeted the sergeant.

The sergeant scowled at him. "You've got as far as you'll go," he said gruffly. "Turn around and go back." His eyes were on the two civilians in the car with the driver. Benny suddenly remembered he wasn't in uniform. He looked at Charlie. Charlie leaned over and gave the code name. Then he

passed over his ID card and one small square of paper. The sergeant walked around the car and looked in at Charlie. Then he smiled.

"You are Captain Grafton. I should have recognized you. We'll take you right in." His glance held on the shattered rear window, then turned to Kent for a brief moment. He stiffened and snapped an order. They were within the tight circle of AF security. Kent let his whole body relax. This was it. From now on he'd know what the odds were.

CHAPTER 14

Preflight

KENT looked around as the car moved into the base. It was clear that this was a small base and one that had recently been reactivated. The buildings were old and rusty. He could not see the runways, but he was sure they had really been worked over. He was relaxed and eager to get along with the job ahead. Flying a mission with the monster would be routine compared to what he had been through. How simple it would have been, he thought, to have sent him to this base under tight military protection without all of the attempted secrecy. He was sure he must have overlooked some very good reason known only to the top planners.

A jeep with an armed guard had gone ahead of the car. It was like trailing a follow-me jeep in from the flight line. The jeep halted before a quonset hut that appeared to be a warehouse, as it had no windows and was fitted with wide doors at the end where they had stopped.

A small door cut into the big doors opened and a colonel stepped out. Kent started grinning eagerly the moment he saw the officer. He heard Charlie chuckle and knew they had held out on him regarding some of the men he was to work with. He got out of the car and hurried forward.

"Kent! Am I glad to see you!" The colonel thrust out a hand.

"Mo Irwin!" Kent shouted. "Where'd you come from?"

Colonel M. O. Irwin had once been Kent's wing commander. He had later worked with Charlie on the first designs of the monster. Benny had also served under him as a crew chief. His friends stood smiling broadly as the two shook hands.

"Somebody had to wet-nurse you guys," Mo said. He turned to Charlie. "I hear our idea of sending you and Benny into Seoul wasn't so hot."

"It came unstuck but fast," Charlie said. "Everything was going fine, then suddenly the ceiling fell in."

"Come inside and tell me about it," Mo said.

They entered the quonset and Kent found himself in a large room that was fitted out as a briefing room. There was a big table with maps and charts on it and there were other maps and charts on the wall.

The boys seated themselves and told the colonel about their adventure getting out of Seoul. Kent knew that all of the wraps were off now and he talked freely, beginning with his adventures in crossing the Pacific. Mo listened and nodded his head from time to time.

"That's it," Kent said when he finished telling how he had left Itazuke.

"Everything would have gone off without a hitch if there hadn't been a leak back in the States. And it wasn't at our end, it was right in the Pentagon. Young officer with a persecution complex back there did a job for the Commies," Mo explained. "Even after things started to happen to you we were sure they did not have this base spotted."

"They probably know now," Kent said.

"No." Mo was positive. "We've already fished that Cadillac out of the river. It hit in a shallow spot. Everyone in it dead. They had no radio phones or other way of communicating. They just trailed you and tried to polish you off. Of course

they knew where you were going when you took the dike road, but they never got to send a message back."

"Could be," Kent agreed. "But all along there have been a lot of 'ifs.' "

Mo got to his feet and walked to a wall map. He picked up a pointer. "You hit them tomorrow," he said.

Kent got to his feet and stood before the map. "Good," he said eagerly. "I'd rather play tag with the whole Red air force than play hide-and-seek with a gang of enemy agents."

Charlie moved over and looked at the map. "Benny and I will go over and have a last look at the monster," he said.

"Good idea," Mo answered. "You have that baby in shape for tomorrow." He smiled after the two as they hurried away. "Charlie has been checking that gadget for days," he said. "Sleeps over there with it."

"I'm glad he's here," Kent said. "He knows more about the monster than any living person."

Mo regarded Kent thoughtfully. He hesitated, then said, "You have confidence in the gadget? Last work I did on it the blasted thing didn't always work." A worried frown creased his forehead.

"There are bugs in it," Kent admitted. "But I've always been lucky."

"Here's hoping your luck holds. Know what they've got beyond the curtain?"

Kent shook his head. "Plenty, I guess."

"We estimate three thousand fighters, jet Mig-15's and 17's along with a thousand IL-28 medium bombers in our B-47 class. A lot of them will be in the area you will test." Mo slid the pointer in a big circle over the map.

"They didn't live up to the armistice agreement?" Kent

said. "They weren't supposed to build airfields or bring in new planes to North Korea, were they?"

"No, but they have seven hundred and seventy-eight jet aircraft within fifteen minutes' flying time from this strip," Mo said.

"What about violating their sovereign territory?" Kent asked.

Mo laughed. "They claim a lot of water that is open sea according to international law. We have a right to fly those areas. Of course you'll hedge in as close as you can so as to give them a good show. You'll fly low so they can identify you visually. We want them to see you and to realize their radar screen is useless."

"Should be quite a show," Kent said with a wide smile.

"Once they sight you they'll have everything up and after you," Mo warned him grimly.

"I'll have an F-102A?" Kent asked anxiously.

"The same ship you used in testing the monster. But we will have to use other F-102A's at Itazuke and Kadena. We'll shoot the monster on down aboard a fighter bomber." Mo smiled.

"Repeat performance?"

"If this one goes over. Make 'em think we have plenty of craft equipped with the monster." Mo turned back to the map.

"This will be a chance to show just what that lady has," he said softly.

"Yeah, and you can tell us just how good the Mig-117 is." Mo frowned. "Been a lot of talk about how much better that 117 is over our stuff."

"Bunk," Kent retorted. "Just you wait until I get through with those 117's."

"Cocky," Mo observed. "You haven't changed a bit. But you're still alive and kicking." He grinned.

"How am I equipped?" Kent asked.

"You will have Doc Draper's internal-guidance instruments. Cut off the monster and we can bring you in if you black out. But better not black out with homing rockets close by."

"I never liked Doc's instruments. One of these days I'll be out of a job," Kent said.

"Just don't fly so fast they can't identify you," Mo said with a laugh. He turned to the table and laid out a set of maps and charts. "Here is your flight plan. We'll go over it after you have studied it. I have a top-level meeting to attend. Stay here until I come for you."

"A lot of brass here?" Kent asked.

"A lot will be here when you come in. They'll all be on listening posts with interpreters while you are out." Mo walked to the door and stopped there. "Don't try to leave here. This place is guarded closer than a SAC B-52 loaded with an H bomb." He opened the door and Kent caught a glimpse of a guard outside.

Kent seated himself and started studying the charts and maps. He knew the area as far north as the Yalu River very well because he had flown many missions over it. The northern inland part of the Yellow Sea was marked off as claimed by the Red Chinese and North Koreans. His mission was charted in this area. As he sat looking at the maps he realized how tight the security was. If an enemy agent could have looked at those maps he would have known the exact route Kent was to fly. Here they were lying on a table. He glanced around the room quickly, as though expecting Asko and her burly pal, Kim, to pop out of the woodwork, then he relaxed and laughed

softly. Probably Colonel Mo Irwin was the only man allowed inside this room, aside from people like Charlie and Benny.

He pored over the maps and charts for a long time, and was still so intent upon them that he did not hear Mo enter the room. He jumped when Mo spoke. Mo laughed.

"Don't tell me Kent Barstow is developing nerves," he said.

"I won't have any nerves when I get into my gear and off the ground," Kent answered with a sheepish smile. "This cloak-and-dagger stuff does make me jumpy. I wouldn't have been surprised if you'd turned out to be a sweet little oriental girl with a foot-long dagger."

"Like to meet that girl," Ma said.

"Not me." Kent shook his head, then smiled. "But you know something? I hope they don't catch her."

Mo grinned. "She has vanished completely from the Tokyo area. Intelligence thinks she's safe behind the Bamboo Curtain."

Mo got another map from a drawer in the table. He pointed with a finger. "Here's the radar screen and it's really a tight one, as good as any we have." His finger paused on the map. "Right here you can let them get you well inside guided-missile and radar-gun range. They have a lot of ground-to-air missiles they are proud of."

Kent nodded. "I can always go upstairs where the F-102A does her best work. She'll just about fly straight up if you give her a big shot of afterburner."

Kent followed Mo's finger as it traced the course he would follow. He already had that course memorized in detail, but this was a briefing, and he knew he could not go over the details too often.

Mo left him again but said he would be back to take Kent to his quarters. He grinned at Kent. "From now on you'll be

the best-guarded man in the Air Force." He left the room and Kent went back to studying maps and charts and weather reports. Intelligence had done an expert job of placing all enemy installations, gun batteries, ground-to-air stations, flight lines, bases, and types of aircraft flown from them. Kent stared grimly at one of the reports. Someone had risked his life getting those details. Much of it probably came from Roc intelligence men, but not all of it. Colonel Jefferys had been right when he said that few people knew just what AFCIN really did in the course of duty.

Two hours slipped past, and Kent kept on studying the charts and maps. Another hour passed before Mo returned. Kent leaned back and flexed his arms over his head. "Nice job Jefferys' boys have done on these reports," he said.

Mo nodded. "You wonder sometimes how they manage to get so much."

Kent leaned forward and tapped a report. "Somebody risked his neck to get this dope. We didn't leave any airfield here, and I know there wasn't a Mig-15 left in the whole area."

"They're there now," Mo said. "And somebody up there would like to use them." Mo began gathering up the papers. "I'll run you over to your quarters."

Mo stacked the reports and shoved them into a drawer. Outside the quonset there was a squad of armed guards, and a jeep with four airmen in it was parked back of Mo's staff car.

Kent's quarters were in a quonset hut that looked as though it was about to fall down. It was badly rusted along the foundation and along the riveted seams. He hoped it did not rain that night.

Mo nodded toward the quonset as they got out of the car. "We'll sleep here. Chow will be along after Charlie and Benny come in."

Mo led the way into the quonset. There was a lounge room forward. The easy chairs and the divan looked mouldy. The whole place smelled musty, even though there was every indication that it had very recently been cleaned. Kent sank into a chair and smiled up at Mo.

"How about having somebody round up a razor and a toothbrush for me? We left the hotel in Seoul so fast I didn't get to pack a bag."

"I'm having some stuff sent over," Mo said.

Presently a small bag was delivered. It held a few things Kent would need that night. A half-hour later Charlie and Benny came in.

"How's the monster?" Mo asked.

Charlie smiled wearily. "Working," he said.

Benny sprawled out in a chair. "Man, am I hungry. When do we eat?"

"After you birds wash up." Mo said. "Chow will be here any minute."

Kent leaned back and relaxed. Tomorrow morning he'd be doing something he knew how to do. He wondered what Spud was doing on Itazuke. Probably in town having a good time. Two airmen arrived with hot food and thermos jugs of coffee. He was hungry and that was a good sign, nerves all in place and under control.

CHAPTER 15

The Monster

THE F-102A was waiting on the flight line. Kent regarded it fondly. In building the fighter interceptor, Convair had departed radically from the usual rifle-bullet shape of other fighters. The delta-winged F-102A looked like a big bottle or keg, except for its needle nose. But Kent knew exactly what it could do. It could smash through the sonic barrier, and it could climb with incredible speed to nine miles above sea level. Up there it maneuvered with ease.

Benny and his crew had finished the final check. Charlie Grafton was nervously checking off items in a thick notebook. He was squatted down on the ground, his mouth twisted into a frown of concentration. Mo Irwin stood beside Kent. This was the last chance to talk. Kent's parachute and helmet lay at his feet. Once he was outfitted completely he could talk only over his phone system.

Mo glanced at his wrist watch. "Ten minutes," he said.

Kent nodded. Ten minutes until take-off. He started getting into his gear. Charlie and Benny moved in to help him. His pressure suit added bulk and made movements clumsy. With the chute and helmet in place Kent turned toward the steel ladder leading to the cockpit. He climbed up and eased himself into the ejection seat. Benny was close behind him. He

checked the gear and gave the instrument panel a final once-over.

Kent settled back against his chute. He could feel the bulk of the emergency oxygen flask sewed into his suit. The suit pressed against his legs and stomach. It felt right. When he got up high, that pressure would push blood to his head where it was needed to prevent black-out. Benny plugged in the ship's oxygen and radio phone line. Kent took a breath and watched the metallic lips on the indicator open and close. Oxygen O.K. He pressed the phone button.

"Red Eagle Three calling. Do you read me?"

"Read you five square, Red Eagle Three," a voice from the tower answered.

Kent glanced at the extra group of dials on the board. Those controlled the monster, a switch and four dials for adjustment. Those four dials were the key to the efficiency of the monster. When it was finally perfected, they would not be needed.

He took a few deep breaths of pure oxygen. Breathing pure oxygen before take-off built up resistance he would later need. The oxygen regulator punched the gas into his lungs like a bicycle pump.

Benny grinned down at him and lifted a hand, then his round face vanished. Kent waited for the ladder to clear, then released the canopy control. The bubble lowered and locked solidly into place. Kent glanced at his ejection-seat control and gave his seat pins a fast check. Everything was automatic, seat belt, ejection seat and bubble, even his parachute control.

Preflight checkoff was a matter of habit. No matter how great the emergency was when a scramble was ordered, the check had to be made. His mind clicked over the items, missing nothing. When he had cleared, he eased his body into a better position and started the Pratt and Whitney J-57 engine. The

J-57 always gave him a feeling of security and power. Back of him he had more thrust than all of the elevators in the world's tallest skyscraper.

The F-102A was no ground lover. It muttered and rumbled in angry impatience as Kent taxied out to the limits of the runway and swung around. Kent held it trembling and straining for a brief space of time while he cleared with the tower. The high-flying bottle suddenly started to move down the runway. It strained along with its rpm's reading 100 per cent but the runway was still there, sliding past like a black ribbon. Kent shifted to afterburner and the ship blasted ahead like a rocket leaving its platform. Within seconds Kent was airborne and the wheels were up and tucked away. Normally he would have nosed the fighter up at an angle reserved for skyrockets, but today his flight plan was different so he climbed at a lesser angle.

"Red Eagle Three," he called. "Do you read me clear?"

"Reading you five square, Red Eagle Three," ground control answered.

"Red Eagle Three going off the air. Be seeing you," Kent called back cheerfully.

Kent knew that his thirty-one-thousand-pound fighter would not have the hair-trigger responses at low altitude that it would have above forty thousand feet. He liked to fly close to the ceiling. The fighter lost one hundred feet altitude for every extra pound she carried above fifty thousand. The monster would cut her ceiling a little, he'd have to remember that.

His wing tanks were full of fuel and that gave him long range. He carried no rockets and no deadly cannon operated by an A-1 sight. His mission was actually a friendly one, but he knew it would not receive a friendly welcome. He tuned his radio to a wave length that was used by the fliers back of the

radar screen he meant to penetrate. If the monster failed to work, he would know it at once. He would not have to understand what was said. When a scramble started on a base below, the meaning would be clear enough.

The F-102A screamed along and the ship began to speak with a voice of its own as the buffets tapped and rapped and pulled at its sleek outer skin. The sea below was slate-gray and at an altitude of fifteen hundred feet it seemed very close. He switched on the monster and started tuning. It appeared to be working if he could believe the dial readings. He should blast through the radar screen without raising a single blip on any of the many alert screens watching the area.

He knew he was inside the screen when he saw, far to his right, a low shore line. He was entering Chosen Bay. The shore line veered east, and Kent shifted his course. He was now surrounded by land bodies from which fighter craft could reach him in a matter of minutes, from North Korea, Manchukuo, Hopeh, and Shantung in Red China. He had heard no excited talk from any base. There was talk, but it was clearly routine calls and answers.

Up ahead he saw a ship and as he streaked over it he recognized it as a naval vessel of the destroyer class. That should start the fireworks. He could see men on deck and knew they had their glasses on him. They would read the USAF lettering and spot the circle and star.

After that he began to pick up excited or terse or angry orders snapping through the air. The scramble was on. He swept over another destroyer so close that he could see its antiaircraft batteries. Puffs of smoke told him that the shooting had started. Soon there would be guided missiles coming up at the F-102A, missiles that were supposed to be radar-guided to his silver ship. The ground guns, too, would be sighted by

radar. Kent grinned broadly. Ack-ack shells were bursting far to his rear, blossoming in the sky like gray mushrooms. Soon he started evasive tactics. The gunners would start firing from visual observations, trying to compute his speed and course. He saw no rockets or larger missiles. They were probably flying unguided into space.

Kent laughed inside his plastic mask. He could imagine the frustration of the men trying to box him in on their radar scopes, finding nothing there at all, even though their eyes told them that a fighter plane was flying overhead. It was catastrophe pure and simple for a defense system keyed to and controlled by radar.

He swung closer to the shore line. His orders were to stay out eleven miles so that he would be over international water. But he had a powerful urge to frustrate the shore batteries and the rocket and missile stations. He cut in sharply and zoomed close to shore for a few miles. Heavy ground action ahead told him he had closed on a defense area. He banked and nosed the fighter up in a tight spiral. There was little use in flying through a barrage. He could very well fly into a shell or a rocket.

Then high above him he sighted a flight of Migs. They were coming down out of the sun in a screaming dive. Deprived of their radar, they were using an old World War II trick, coming in on a blind angle and using the sun. There were seven of them and by their swept-wing shape he knew they were 17's. Kent hit the afterburner and pointed the 102's needle nose straight up. The big fighter screamed like a thing alive as it shot up into the blue. He slid off in a tight turn and leveled off. It was incredible the way he had passed the 17's. He doubted if any of them had gotten off a burst. He had not really seen them as they closed. All he had seen was a series of blurred

images. Now he had them spotted again. They were coming around in a tight turn for another try. Kent went on up, eager to test the Mig-17's. They came up fast but he easily slipped away from them. Now the air was literally swarming with planes looking for him. A big IL-28 jet bomber loomed off to the port at three o'clock. Kent knew the big killer had unloosed its deadly homing missiles. It made a chill run along his spine. The monster had better not falter now. He was sure the homing torpedoes had passed him by without being aware of him. But there were too many fighters and interceptors and medium bombers up and on the prowl to make sticking around safe. He went on up, ducking and twisting, then circled and pointed the nose of the F-102A toward home.

As he flew southward he wondered if he had done all that he could have done to convince the men who operated the radar network that they were suddenly without a protecting screen. A hundred pilots must have read the lettering on his ship and identified it, thousands on the ground must have seen it. He was sure that it had been photographed. He chuckled to himself. He still had to be on the alert, but with every mile that flashed behind him the danger lessened.

Presently he spotted three aircraft ahead of him. As they came on they waggled their wings in a familiar manner. They were Super Sabrejets out to escort him home. As they came up on him they laid over in perfect formation and went into a tight bank, coming around on his tail as he eased off on his speed. They dropped into place, one on each wing and one above him. Kent switched his wave length and was startled to hear Spud's voice.

"Wake up, Red Eagle. Give us the dirt." Spud was flying one of the Sabrejets.

Then fainter and farther away Mo's voice came in. "Red Eagle Three, do you read me?"

"Red Eagle Three to base. I read you five square. I'm coming in. Just picked up my escort."

"Was it rugged?" Mo asked.

"They threw everything at me they had. No soap," Kent answered.

"Out," Mo said. "See you."

Then Spud cut in again. "Dirty deal. You hogging all of the fun."

"You can say that again." Kent laughed.

The four jets made one pass over the small base. The Sabre-jets took altitude and circled behind Kent. He came in and smoke trails flared behind him as rubber hit the black top. His parachute bellied out and he felt its pull. The big fighter started to slow and after a mile of coasting she came to a halt. Kent eased her around and taxied in.

When he climbed down from the cockpit, with Benny helping him, he was startled to see Colonel Jefferys standing beside Mo. Major Bedford was there, too. Kent supposed he had flown up with Spud. He wanted to get out of his gear before they descended on him. Benny managed to get his helmet off before they closed in.

CHAPTER 16

Mission Accomplished

KENT soon discovered that he wasn't going to be questioned at length, nor would he have to make out a detailed report until later. He was to be on his way to Itazuke to repeat his stunt from that base. There would have been time for a detailed report but Mo Irwin insisted that Kent get some rest if he was to fly again that day. Mo was an experienced wing commander and knew that Kent's mission had been tough and wearing, even if he had not had trouble.

Spud came to his quarters as soon as he landed and checked in. He was excited about the monster. Presently Benny and Charlie slipped in. They had successfully evaded Mo, who thought Kent was alone and sleeping.

Kent gave his friends a detailed account of his trip. They listened and asked a few questions. Charlie had been in a listening room where there were a number of interpreters to translate what was heard from the enemy radio. He laughed as he described the confusion to the north.

"They just had to believe it," he said. "But there were a lot of high-ranking fellows on the air blasting those pilots who kept reporting in that they were chasing a USAF fighter."

"Bet those 17 boys are gnashing their teeth," Spud said.

"They know they've been looking at the best fighter craft so far," Kent said. "I could turn that 102 in twice as tight a

turn as they could, and when I went upstairs that old J-57 took off like a skyrocket."

Benny got to his feet reluctantly. "Have to get back to the crew," he said. "If Mo happened along and I wasn't there I'd go home basic airman." He waved a hand from the doorway. "I'll see you at Itazuke. I'm going down on a T-33."

Charlie got to his feet. "I have to run, too." He grinned at Kent. "Have to have a look at the monster before you take off." He put on his cap and left.

Kent leaned back. "Hear anything more about our friends?" he asked.

"Bedford said they caught the big wrestler trying to get out of Japan. Rounded up a couple of others, but the girl got away." Spud shook his head. "Think I'll try to get into this foreign-agent business."

"Not for me," Kent said. "I want to get back to the Mojave Desert. They're about to test a fighter interceptor that will out-fly the 102."

Spud looked at his watch. "You can grab an hour of shut-eye if I shove off." He got to his feet.

Kent didn't want to sleep, but he did not mind being alone. After Spud left, he sat and relaxed. Colonel Jefferys' brief praise had made him feel good. He was sure it was one of the few times the hard-boiled colonel had allowed his feelings to show. Itazuke, then Kadena. He grinned to himself. It looked as though the colonel's bluff were going to work.



